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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SINGLE MOTHERS IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION:

THEIR WORDS, THEIR WORLD

BY

FLORENCE BROKOP

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT, CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING, 1991



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"You think for me, think for Sarah,
as if there were no 'I'. Until you
let me be an 'I', the way you are,
you can never come inside my silence
and know me. And I won't let myself
know you ..."

Children of a Lesser God
1986 Paramount Pictures Corp.

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled SINGLE MOTHERS IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION: THEIR WORDS, THEIR WORLD submitted by Florence Brokop in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Adult and Higher Education.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the world of single mothers enrolled in full-time academic upgrading programs and report the challenges and triumphs they experience as learners.

To obtain the data, personal interviews were conducted with five female single parents over the course of up to two years. An interview questionnaire, designed to solicit background information, was used for the initial interview. Subsequent interviews, held every three to six months, were less structured.

The interviews were transcribed, summarized and presented in case study or vignette format for each of the five interviewees. These vignettes were revised and edited in consultation with the interviewees. The data were further analyzed to abstract themes that ran through the case studies. The validity of the seventeen themes was checked through a group discussion with the interviewees.

The findings of the study indicated that the problem of illiteracy, for the women interviewed, was a symptom of a number of social problems they encountered as children and that continued to plague them throughout their adult years. The challenges faced by the women as students require an expansion of special support services and flexibility in terms of institutional expectations and the affective personal outcomes of ABE should be recognized as legitimate gains.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Illiteracy was once thought to be primarily a third world problem. In the last ten years, it has become recognized as a problem within our own borders.

Debate rages on over defining terms and measuring illiteracy. The traditional definition of illiteracy, based on census data, equates an individual's completed number of years of formal schooling with literacy. Adults who have less than five years of formal school are thought to be unable to read or write well enough to handle "simple" reading and writing tasks encountered in daily life and are thus considered "illiterate". Those adults with less than nine years of formal schooling are considered to be functionally illiterate; that is they do not possess a more advanced level of learning and coping skills, are unable to gain entry into most training or post secondary institutions and are thought to be unable to engage in the development of their community. The 1981 census statistics indicate that 20.1% of Canada's population over the age of fifteen have completed less than grade nine.

In a report prepared by Thomas (1983:57) for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 1983 census statistics indicate that 28.4% of adults over the age of eighteen have completed less than grade nine and 5.5% have completed less than grade five. The main problem with the census data definition is that

there may not be a direct relationship between grade level attainment and reading ability. Many adults have completed less than nine or even less than five years of formal school and do not report experiencing difficulty reading or writing well enough to function in society. On the other hand, there are a number of adults who have completed in excess of nine years of school and have great difficulty coping with reading and writing in their lives.

In response to this, an effort has been made to recognize that literacy is more than formal school attainment. The term "functional literacy" has come into prominence and its definition broadened to include the individual's ability to engage in reading and writing activities encountered in everyday life. In May and June of 1987, the Creative Research Group (Calamai, 1987) undertook a national literacy survey for Southam Press in which a random cross-section of the Canadian population as well as oversamples of certain segments of the population (certain cities, regions and 21 - 25 age group) were tested with a selection of items judged as essential for the daily life of Canadians. Literacy, as defined in this survey, is the ability to use printed and written information to function in society. Although the survey was criticized for the choice of test items, the cut-off points assigned and a lack of recognition that functional literacy must be defined within a social and regional context (Fagan, 1989), the survey served some useful functions. The national Southam newspaper, through its sponsorship of this survey, brought the issue of illiteracy to the attention of the Canadian public. Follow-up

newspaper and magazine articles, television and radio talk shows and recognition of local literacy initiatives continued to raise public awareness of a literacy problem in Canada. The study found that approximately 24% of the adult population (18+ years old) are illiterate (Calamai, 1987).

In 1989, on behalf of the National Literacy Secretariat, Statistics Canada conducted a survey similar to the Southam survey. A larger sample was used and individuals were interviewed and tested in an effort to measure reading, writing and numeracy activities encountered in Canadian life. Test items ranged from "locating a word or item in a document (for example, locating the expiry date on a driver's license) to more complex abilities involving the integration of information from various parts of a document ..." (Statistics Canada, May 1990:1). Preliminary results indicate that approximately 16% of Canada's adults do not possess the reading skills necessary to deal with written material encountered in everyday life and a further 22% are able to carry out "simple reading tasks" but do not have skills to cope with more complex reading tasks (1990:3).

These attempts at measuring and defining illiteracy have resulted in alarming statistics. Accordingly, one would conclude that large numbers of adults apparently lack the reading and writing skills necessary to participate fully in society. However, the number of adults who enrol in adult upgrading programs is relatively low. In Western Canada, less than 2% of adults who have less than nine years of formal schooling enrolled in upgrading programs

(DeCoito, 1984:8). A slightly higher percent of men (2.2%) than women (1.4%) participate in full-time education programs and less than 0.6% of under-educated men and women participate in part-time programs (1984:9). Nationally, the Southam Survey found that only one in ten adults considered illiterate would consider enrolling in upgrading programs (Calamai, 1987).

There have been many explanations why participation in programs is so low. Factors that deter low literate adults from participating in programs include; low self confidence, lack of support from significant others, personal situations that inhibit participation (ie. illness, lack of money, dependent children) and a negative attitude towards formal classes. Further, some adults do not have difficulty functioning in society and thus see little reason to continue their education (Hayes and Darkenwald, 1988). Hayes (1988:1) also suggests that results of studies indicate that low literate adults typically experience a combination of barriers, thus making it even more difficult to eliminate obstacles for learners.

Although there is debate over the definition of "drop out" in adult basic education, the rate of noncompletion of programs is high. Many of the same reasons that acted as deterrents to participation emerge as reasons for noncompletion, but in addition, students report failures and shortcomings of programs themselves. These shortcomings include inconvenient location of programs, large classes and rigid schedules, testing procedures, inadequate

learning materials and inappropriate methods, lack of counselling and lack of recognition of the needs, wants and goals of the students (Seaman, 1971).

What emerges from an investigation of the literature on participation and noncompletion in adult basic education is a need for further research into the lives of the students we are attempting to attract and keep in programs. Fingeret (1983) has suggested that an understanding of adult illiterates in their social world is our biggest challenge today. "A knowledge of the learner's needs, wants, beliefs and preferences is, therefore, vital to successful recruiting" (Martin, 1989:83) and, as discussed by Seaman (1971), to the retention of students in programs. Kavale and Lindsey (1977), in lamenting the lack of overall success of adult basic education in the United States say, "The fundamental problem concerns the inability of ABE to meet the needs of those illiterate adults who enrol in programs. To meet these adults' needs, ABE must devise strategies to ... develop a significant body of knowledge about the characteristics of illiterate adults ..." (Kavale and Lindsey, 1977:370).

To develop this body of knowledge, quantitative and qualitative research has been undertaken. But, as Rockhill (1982:6) has argued, "statistically based theories (the basis of quantitative research) dissect reality to give insight to it's uniformities; the price is the loss of individual uniqueness and the complexities that make any situation what it is." The purpose of qualitative research is to understand reality through inductive analysis. The focus is on an individual's experience of reality and "to understand and explain people from within their

own frame of reference" (1982:8) at the same time acknowledging that the individual is part of a society that impacts upon him or her. It is from this qualitative stance that I seek to add to the existing body of knowledge about the lives of adult literacy participants. The purpose of this study is to document, through case studies, the challenges and triumphs of female, single parents enrolled in full-time literacy programs. Three questions will be addressed to the women in order to gain insight into their world:

1. What is it like to be a single mother and an adult basic education student?
2. What are some of the challenges you've faced?
3. What are some of the good things that have happened in your life because as a single mother you've come back to school?

DELIMITATIONS

The study was delimited to five female single parents enrolled in various full-time upgrading programs in Edmonton. The study did not attempt to generalize the life circumstances of these participants to all female single parents nor evaluate the programs the participants were enrolled in.

LIMITATIONS

The study was limited by the women's abilities to recall and articulate responses to my questions and my ability to elicit information from the

participants. The study was further limited to the perspective of the students in programs and does not reflect the opinions of teachers or administrators.

ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

The present chapter stated the problem and purpose of the study. The major questions to be explored were presented. As well, the delimitations and limitations of the study were explained. The remainder of this study is organized as follows:

Chapter two includes a review of the literature and research relevant to the study.

Chapter three describes the method and design of the study.

Chapter four includes the findings of the study presented as individual case studies.

Chapter five presents the findings of the study in terms of themes common across the cases and themes particular to individuals.

Chapter six summarizes the findings, states implications for practise and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

RELATED LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the topics of adult literacy and adult basic education. As the purpose of this chapter is to give credibility to the research I undertook, I chose to focus on literature that underlies the three main questions I addressed to the women in my study:

1. What is it like to be a single mother and an adult basic education student?
2. What are some of the challenges you've faced?
3. What are some of the good things that have happened in your life because as a single mother, you've come back to school?

The first part of this chapter will focus on research that applies to both male and female ABE participants and the second to studies of adult female students. Literature that relates specifically to female single parents in ABE is not substantial, but it was noted in several studies that a large proportion of women in ABE are single parents, therefore, some of the observations

pertaining to women in ABE may also pertain to the sub-group of single mothers.

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

Our understanding of the world of illiterate adults has expanded with increased recognition that ABE students are not a homogenous group (Jones and Charnley, 1977; Fingeret, 1983; Darkenwald and Valentine, 1984; Fagan, 1989). Harman and Hunter (1979:113) emphasize that illiterate adults' communities are a source of their personal identity and that in order for programs to be successful, they must understand the realities of these communities.

The first question to be addressed in this study relates to the community of ABE students; more specifically, their life circumstances. By life circumstances, I would include the personal history of students; including educational, family and work history, the coping strategies adopted by people who lack necessary literacy skills needed to function in their world and the motivation and goals of adults who enter ABE programs.

The second question relates to the challenges faced by ABE students in and outside of programs. And the third question relates to the outcomes of ABE. Each of the question focusses will be addressed below.

Personal History of ABE Students

Much of the literature dealing directly with the lives of ABE students seems to begin with the students' entry into a program, and ends with their reasons for leaving programs. Little research explores the life styles, opinions and perceptions of students while they are students in a program and fewer yet explore, in any depth, the life these students had before entry into ABE. Jones and Charnley (1977) undertook a large study of the British national literacy campaign which took place in the mid 1970s. In addition to conventional statistical treatment of demographic information, the researchers undertook a qualitative approach in order to explore the effect of the campaign on the lives of the administrators, tutors and students. It is in the interviews with students that they were able to glean information on the students' life circumstances including their personal histories.

Jones and Charnley (1977) found that recollections of the students' past began with attempts at explaining why they had been academically unsuccessful. A few students laid blame on their schools and fewer yet blamed their parents. Students tended to attribute "... their lack of progress to their own inadequacy, laziness, the lack of understanding on the part of particular teachers, or broken schooling for one reason or another." (Jones and Charnley, 1977:79). Memories of school were characterized by feelings of inadequacy and

the belief that more individualized attention may have made a difference in their ability to succeed (1977).

Webb (1970) suggests that although there is no single or general cause for adult "sub-literacy", the reasons why people left school before achieving an accepted level of literacy may be grouped into three categories: institutional, economic and personal. The institutional category includes inadequacies of educational institutions. These "faults in the system" include inadequate physical resources such as facilities, books and teaching aids as well as inadequate curriculum, and underqualified or disinterested teachers. Also included is the inflexibility of the institution to accommodate individual differences or cultural differences. He argues that the educational system "... is the product of an established middle-class society whose values, skills and knowledge inevitably form the framework and substance of the education program. Those who cannot adjust to the standard leave school..." (Webb, 1970:10).

The economic causes of sub-literacy include both the fact that poverty at home makes it necessary for young people to leave school and help support the family or support themselves, as well as the enticement, in some communities, to leave school and earn an income in relatively high paying industries that require manual labour. The temptation to leave school in order to make "big bucks" is all the more enticing if the young person sees little hope of success

in school; does not see the relevance of education to later life or is not encouraged to continue his education by significant others (1970:10).

Personal factors constitute Webb's third category of causes of sub-literacy. Included here are low levels of intelligence, parental disinterest, low levels of motivation to succeed in primary or secondary school or low levels of motivation to change economic or social position (1970).

The family forms the first social group for humans and to a large extent influences how they view themselves and the world. If we accept the concept of a circle of illiteracy, where parental disinterest in literacy and schooling is passed on to the next generation, then the lack of support from parents with regard to the value of education is very important. Jones and Charnley (1977:51) found that a disorganized (by middle class standards) family life promoted non-attendance at school and that most ABE students' parents did not involve themselves in their children's formal education (1977:57).

The work history of illiterate adults is characterized by diversity. Jones and Charnley (1977:73) found that approximately half of the participants in the British literacy scheme held relatively skilled and demanding jobs; however, in urban areas there was a larger proportion of unskilled and manual workers and unemployed participants.

Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) conducted in-depth interviews with a random sample of 294 ABE students and found that at the time of entry into ABE, 62.5% were not employed. Their study included an oversample of large,

urban programs and they did not include information on the kind of work held by the employed 37.5% of students in their sample.

Fingeret (1983:138-139), noted a diverse work history in her study of the social networks within the illiterate community. There were adults who were economically successful and worked in public roles and there were also those who were engaged in "functionary" or service employment. Unskilled or semi-skilled labourers were most often found in the group she called "locals". Many employed adults with inadequate literacy skills report that they are not required to read or write at work. But those who are faced with literacy on the job often hide their weakness to avoid embarrassment. In addition to the embarrassment sometimes felt by adults who were confronted with literacy tasks at work that were beyond their academic abilities, low literacy skills blocked promotion or transfer from one job to another and illiteracy was a possible reason for dismissal (Jones and Charnley, 1977).

The coping strategies employed by adults who lack literacy skills seem to fall within two categories. There are those adults "... whose defence mechanism is to reveal all" (1977:83) and there are those who hide their illiteracy from the world "outside" and rely on complex social networks to accomplish literacy related tasks (Fingeret, 1983). When social networks are unavailable, individuals relate to any one of a number of coping strategies; from delegating reading and writing tasks to others on the job, to covering up illiteracy with PR skills and an ability to "talk" (Fagan, 1989:10-12). For one or more of a

variety of reasons, many adults do attempt to join the literate society. Again, diversity characterizes this aspect of the life circumstances of illiterate adults. What motivates adults to enrol in programs cannot be answered with a single response. Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) found that for 39.1% of the students surveyed, life change events precipitated the students' desire to enrol in an upgrading program. These life change events included the desire to change or gain employment, marriage, children, divorce and death. They found that over 40% of students surveyed indicated that the most important reason for their enrolment was to obtain a diploma or finish school. Obtaining a better job and improving basic skills were noted by 18.9% as being the most important reasons and preparing for further education was deemed most important by 8.9% (1984). The possible interrelatedness of the responses indicate the difficulty in determining one main factor to explain motivation. Perhaps students wanted to obtain a diploma in the belief that this would lead to a better job or perhaps a diploma would allow them to enrol in further education and improve their self-concept.

Jones and Charnley (1977) found five main motives for enrolment in the British literacy initiative. The first motive relates to vocation; the unemployed wanted employment or hoped to increase their chance at obtaining employment. But Jones and Charnley (1977) note that this motive may be more than a simple desire for a job. By indicating that she would like to become a nurse's aide because she liked to help people, one student seemed to

be saying that she would like a chance to explore a talent she recognized in herself or an interest she had and in order to develop this talent she needed to enter a particular occupation. This way of looking at vocation as motivation credits the learner with having an image of herself as a competent person with talents to develop.

The second motive for adults entering literacy programs relates to parenthood. These adults wanted to improve their literacy skills in order to better handle the functional reading associated with their children's school; for example they wanted to be able to read letters from the school and help their children with homework. They also spoke of wanting to be a positive role model for their children in that their being involved in a literacy program was an example of the importance of education.

Another motive was that termed social opportunity or the chance to change their social position. The literacy initiative in Britain was seen as a second chance at education by some participants.

Some participants felt inadequate in social situations, especially outside their immediate community and it was thought that improving their literacy skills would improve their social interaction.

The final motivational factor described by Jones and Charnley is that of the students' desire to improve their self image. Students expressed feelings of stupidity and ineptness and felt that improving their literacy skills might alleviate these negative self-concepts.

Challenges for ABE Students

Once involved in a literacy program, the illiterate adult faces challenges from forces outside of the program and from the programs themselves.

It is mainly from examining literature that relates to attrition that I was able to gain information on the kinds of challenges facing adult literacy students. It is difficult to find information on shortcomings of the programs themselves from the perspectives of the student. It seems, as Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) point out, that most reasons given by students for their lack of progress are external to the programs. Students tended to blame themselves rather than criticize the programs they were involved in. This may be because external factors play such an important role in the success or lack of success of the student in programs. It may also be that students lack the evaluative skills necessary to criticize programs. Or, the current ABE programs may be so similar to child centred education, that the ABE drop-out is left with the impression that this is all there is to education and since he/she couldn't make it the second time around, obviously there must be something wrong with him/her!

In any case, the literature does indicate that factors outside of programs act as barriers to participation and once participation is initiated, some of these barriers continue to plague participants. Kavale and Lindsey (1977) reviewed literature relating to ABE in order to address the question, "Adult Basic Education: Has It Worked?". They cite four major obstacles facing adults

returning to school as described by Otto and Ford (1967). These obstacles are: economic, home-related problems, social problems and psychological problems. Economic problems include the financial hardship facing adult literacy students. Home-related problems include a lack of support from family members and difficulty adjusting family schedules and demands so that the student is able to concentrate on the literacy program. Social problems include the reluctance of illiterate adults to participate in reading or writing outside of school because of past inabilities and the lack of encouragement they receive from peers and the work place (Otto and Ford, 1967 in Kavale and Lindsey, 1977). Related to social problems experienced by adult literacy students, Jones and Charnley (1977:95) found that some students faced "social hurdles". The student was beginning to move out of the social network which had supported him/her in his/her time of dependency and this change was met with resentment from the old network.

Lewis (1984) explored the importance of institutional and interpersonal support systems in her study on the participation patterns of ABE students. She established five categories to identify specific types of people who either helped or hindered students during their involvement in ABE. The first type were the "rooters" or those who encouraged the student. The second type were called "constants" and included those who did not want the student to change and loved them as they were. The "resources" were those who provided services and information and the "challengers" were those who served as role

models, pushing students to progress further. The "toxics" were those people who inhibited the student's efforts (Lewis, 1984:75). She concludes that friends and family members serve as a primary force in motivating and encouraging students and "... (t)hus the potency of 'outside influences' on student participation cannot be ignored" (1984:76). Further she states that, "(n)o longer can the target population for basic skills classes be seen as consisting solely of potential adult students. Rather outreach efforts must be expanded to include friends, family members, co-workers, and neighbours." (1984:78).

Psychological problems facing the ABE student include the students' fear of failure and the negative feelings they have towards education that may have been cultivated in them as children (Otto and Ford, 1967 in Kavale and Lindsey, 1977).

Outcomes of ABE

Despite the challenges, some students do continue in programs and find that ABE makes a difference in their lives. Jones and Charnley (1977) classified the reported achievements of students in the following order of importance:

- a. affective personal achievements ('I feel better in myself')
- b. affective social achievements ('Yes, a lot easier to get on with the kids')
- c. socio-economic achievements ('I was able to get promotion at work')
- d. cognitive achievements ('I can read better')
- e. enactive achievements ('I can now fill up [sic] a cheque by myself')

Jones and Charnley, 1977:110.

Increased self confidence, which is categorized under affective personal achievements, was found to be the most important achievement. Without an increase in self-confidence, "... progress in the other skills would not take place" (1977:110). Another important observation is that enactive achievements or functional skills were not as highly ranked because it was found that although students had gained self confidence, they were reluctant to display their new learning in everyday life.

Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) developed three categories of outcomes: employment-related, academic and affective. They found that employment-related gains were modest but that there had been decreased dependence on public assistance. Further, they inferred that indirect outcomes of learning such as increased self confidence would further affect the employment-related gains.

Contrary to Jones and Charnley (1977), Darkenwald and Valentine found that ABE students applied their newly learned academic skills to functional activities in everyday life and reported it was a significant outcome of the program (1984). However, Darkenwald and Valentine did concur with Jones and Charnley in finding that ABE resulted in increased levels of self-confidence and positive self-esteem. "Not only are they important as ends in themselves, but they are requisites for continuing personal growth and accomplishment both in the classroom and the world outside" (1984:87).

SUBGROUPS WITHIN ABE

The foregoing discussions of the personal histories of ABE students, challenges and outcomes of ABE illustrate both the complexity and diversity within the ABE population. To better understand the world of illiterate adults, some writers have attempted to describe subgroups within this complex population.

Harman and Hunter (1979), describe subgroups within the ABE population based on the degree to which their values are similar to those of the dominant culture. In group one are those adults who hold the same values as the dominant culture. They left school for personal reasons and continued to engage in nonformal education. They are usually regularly employed and associate with upwardly mobile segments of the population. Their lack of literacy skills are an embarrassing inconvenience. What these adults lack are the credentials necessary to advance in society and they tend to succeed in traditional adult basic education programs. In group two are again adults who hold the same values as the dominant culture but this group differs from group one in three major ways. Adults in group two have had difficulty learning and some lack even the most basic literacy skills. Rather than engaging in nonformal education, they tend to spend incredible amounts of energy hiding their illiteracy from the literate society that surrounds them. Their lack of literacy skills is acutely embarrassing and causes great distress in their daily life. For this group, success in adult literacy programs brings about dramatic

changes in their lives. Group three is comprised of persons who are more removed from the dominant culture. They left school because they were failing and often their second attempt through ABE is unsuccessful. Illiteracy is only one of many deprivations they face. They tend to be employed in menial work and are generally poor. The fourth group is comprised of the hard core poor, those people who are most distant from the values of the dominant culture. They are characterized by overwhelming feelings of powerlessness and despair and are seldom attracted to educational programs. Fingeret (1983:138-141), described two subgroups within the population of undereducated adults based on their sociocultural environment. She referred to these groups as "locals" and "cosmopolitans". Utilizing the model presented by Harman and Hunter (1979) cosmopolitans are those adults who tend to hold the same values as the dominant culture group. They are economically successful, often pass as literate and are comfortable interacting with literate society. Fingeret maintains that they have a heterogeneous, extended social network that helps the individual cope with literacy related activities. The locals, on the other hand, are often unskilled or semiskilled labourers and are generally poor. They tend to have a more homogeneous social world and rely on a smaller, more closely-knit circle of family and friends to deal with literacy in their life.

Building on the concept of social networks, Fagan (1989:7) includes another group he calls "transients". Transients do not have the large support network of family and friends mainly because they are often unemployed and tend to

be transient in a physical sense. They are also transient in a psychological sense in that they lacked personal educational goals and do not have a strong commitment to learning.

WOMEN AND ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

Women comprise approximately half of the ABE population and the observations that pertain to the ABE population in general apply to the women enrolled in programs as well. However, the literature seems to imply that there are differences in the personal history and the challenges faced by male and female ABE students.

Personal History

The personal history of female ABE participants is best gleaned from in-depth personal interviews such as those conducted by Pillay (1986) and Teeling (1990). One should, of course, not make general statements about the population of ABE students based on the small samples in these studies; however, after reading the anecdotal reflections of the women interviewed, I could not help but feel that the world they experienced as children was vastly different from that of my middle class upbringing. As children, these women fell through the cracks of our education system and perhaps because of the inequalities in our society, nets to catch them as they fell did not exist. Their memories are of not attending school because of illness or because of lack of

encouragement from their family, failing in school when they did attend, or being shuffled from one school or program to another and not really completing anything. Stories of leaving school at an early age, having children while still teenagers, abuse, unemployment and a life of poverty were characteristic (Pillay, 1986; Teeling, 1990).

The occupations of many women enrolled in ABE can be classified as semi-skilled or unskilled labour (DeCoito, 1984); jobs that do not pay well, lack security and leave some, based on their perceived contribution to society, feeling unimportant and worthless (Teeling, 1990:31). Statistics indicate that the average employment income of women with less than grade nine education is only 49.5% of the average employment income of males with the same level of education (DeCoito, 1984:10). DeCoito points out, however, that the disparity between male and female income is likely based on sexual discrimination and lack of equal opportunity for women since even women with more than grade nine education earn only 62.5% of the average earnings of men with less than grade nine education (1984:10).

Pillay's (1986) in-depth interviews with four women over a period of seven months revealed a variety of reasons for enrolment in programs. These motives were classified into three categories. Instrumental reasons include the desire to be able to engage in everyday reading and writing, to help their children and increase their employment prospects. Situational factors include conditions in the lives of the women that either made it necessary for them to

improve their literacy skills or made it possible for them to consider upgrading. Psychological reasons include a desire to end negative definitions of themselves and/or promote positive feelings of confidence in their abilities and pride in themselves as people. With this feeling of pride was the feeling that they deserved to accomplish their goal of academic upgrading. In a study of women returning to college, Anderson and Mohny (1988) found that the timing of the women's return to college was affected not only by their motivation but also by the state of their relations and life events. This complex interaction of motivation and enabling factors had more to do with women's enrolment in a program than any single event in isolation.

Challenges

Teeling (1990) conducted interviews with six women as they completed their high school upgrading program. Examining the data from these interviews, she classified the challenges faced by the women as being internal, instructional, or interpersonal. Included in internal challenges are the psychological hurdles that women must overcome in order to succeed in programs. Especially at the beginning of their programs, a lack of self-confidence, feelings of intellectual inferiority and unrealistic expectations of themselves plagued some of the women in Teeling's sample (Teeling, 1990). There was also stress caused by the shift from being other centred, especially in cases where the women had a family to care for, to being more self centred. A lack of adequate finances

and, in some cases, a resulting loss of independence were also internal challenges faced by these students.

Challenges in terms of the instruction included those aspects of instruction controlled by the instructor or institution such as a lack of clarity in terms of evaluation and instruction. It also included the format of instruction. Groupwork was perceived as competition by some participants and DeCoito (1984:42) found that one-to-one teaching and small groups were favoured over a classroom format. Study time as part of the school day was also recommended by women in Teeling's study, especially by those women who also bore the responsibility of children and a home to care for after school hours. Those challenges relating to instruction that were more easily controlled by the student included the challenge of time management and the insecurity with self-directed learning. Having had little control over their education as children, the concept of controlling their learning as adults was foreign to some (Teeling, 1990).

Interpersonal challenges also faced the women in Teeling's study. For some, criticism and doubt from significant others motivated them to excel, whereas some relied heavily on encouragement from peers and their teachers. An additional challenge for one woman was the burden of compassion she felt for other students in the program.

A further category that could be added to Teeling's classification of challenges is that of external challenges. DeCoito (1984) noted that childcare

arrangements and transportation were two important challenges facing female ABE students. These prerequisites for regular attendance were handled by the student outside of ABE support services and a major recommendation from DeCoito's research is that childcare and transportation be part of the support services offered to students. It was also recommended that to provide more flexibility in program offerings, support services such as childcare, transportation and counselling should be available to students in part-time, evening and week-end programs.

Outcomes of ABE

With regard to the outcomes noted by the women she studied, Pillay (1986) noted three major outcomes. Instrumental outcomes include gains in reading and writing skills, but there was a guarded feeling of hope for the future as the women maintained a realistic assessment of their employability.

Situational outcomes include the expressed pride of family members at the women's achievements and the women's feelings of greater control over their lives. Again, there is the expressed realization that to make significant changes in their lives and gain greater control, the women had to overcome many obstacles in addition to a lack of education.

Increased feelings of self worth and self confidence are part of the psychological outcomes of ABE. Pillay noted that students displayed a new found "involved vitality" as they found the world opening up to them.

SUMMARY

In chapter two, I described some of the literature relating to the three questions I explored with the five women in my sample. In addition to information on the personal history, challenges and outcomes of ABE as they relate to male and female students, I outlined studies on the aforementioned topics where the focus was exclusively on women. The next chapter will describe the method and design of my research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD AND DESIGN

INTRODUCTION

To better understand the world of the students we serve is of prime importance for educators. Their personal circumstances directly affect their ability to participate in educational programs, so it is vital that we gain insight into their personal lives. In order to increase my understanding of the social world of learners, I chose to turn to sociological research methods.

McNeill (1985) wrote that ethnography means to write about a way of life, the purpose of which is to "describe the culture and life style of a group of people in a way that is as faithful as possible to the way they see it themselves" (McNeill, 1985:54). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research, including ethnography, seeks not to find causes and explanations, rather to describe a situation as it is at a particular point in history. Through my use of elements of ethnographic research, in particular, case studies and interviews, I conducted an exploratory investigation into the lives of a select number of adult basic education students. My purpose was not to make generalizations or generate specific hypotheses that would be representative of all female single parents, rather it was to enhance

understanding and promote discussion and further research into the nature of the students I seek to serve.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for this study were collected over a period of two years in conjunction with a much larger study, still in progress, conducted by Norman and Malicky. The purpose of the larger study is to examine the impact of literacy programs on the lives of students enrolled in programs. My responsibilities as the research assistant in this large study included the following: recruitment of volunteer participants, liaison with institutions and programs offering literacy instruction, interviews with students and teachers on a regular basis (every three months or six months) and classroom observation. The study included over 90 students reading below the grade 9 level, as measured by the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), enrolled in either full-time or part-time upgrading programs. From this large sample, I purposively chose five female single parents and secured permission from them to use the data from the large study and include extra interview questions that related to my research. Permission was also secured from Norman and Malicky to use data I had collected as a part of their study.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample was limited to five female, single parents enrolled in full-time literacy programs. All of these women were reading below a grade nine reading level, as measured by the TABE, when they began their upgrading program. They ranged in age from early twenties to forty years of age and when the study began, all lived without adult companionship. As had been mentioned, the selection of participants was purposive. Merriam (1989) suggests that "purposive sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (Merriam, 1989:48). Through interviews with over ninety adult basic education students in the Norman and Malicky study, it came to my attention that a large percentage of females enrolled in adult basic education were single parents and were facing challenges particular to their group. After several interviews with a number of female single parents, the sample for my study was chosen with the following criteria in mind:

1. The women and I built trust and good rapport so that they felt comfortable disclosing personal information to me and I to them.
2. The women were verbal and showed a willingness and ability to articulate their feelings with regard to their lives as students.

3. The women were willing to participate in the editing of their life stories.

INTERVIEWS

An initial interview, consisting of a fairly closed questionnaire, was conducted shortly after each student entered the literacy program. Questions on this questionnaire were meant to gain demographic information and to gain some understanding of the students' lives when they began upgrading their education. Most interviews were tape recorded, unless the participant objected. One participant, in my study, did object to the use of the tape recorder at the initial interview but did not object to its use at subsequent interviews.

Follow-through interviews were then conducted every three to six months for the next two years. The follow-through interviews were more open ended than the initial interview. They dealt mainly with the kinds of changes that students felt had occurred in their lives as a result of participating in their literacy program.

Through my association with the female single parents in the Norman and Malicky study, I found that the interviews became as McNeill (1985) describes, "guided conversations" and topics relating to the challenges facing single mothers continually emerged (McNeill, 1985:68). Thus, the three research questions upon which this study is based came from the initial interviews.

Miles and Huberman (1984) state that one of the challenges facing researchers who undertake qualitative research is that the design suffers either from a lack of bounding which results in indiscriminate data collection and data overload or prior bounding which may result in misreading the participants' perceptions because of preconceived perceptions by the researcher. They imply that the most fruitful results of qualitative research result when the researcher keeps prestructured and tight designs to a minimum and instrumentation is steadily modified to explore new leads. Thus, I limited my interview schedule to the following three open-ended questions:

1. What is it like to be a single mother and an adult basic education student?
2. What are some of the challenges you've faced?
3. What are some of the good things that have happened in your life because as a single mother you've come back to school?

Question number one was open ended enough that questions two and three were often not asked. As the participant conversed with me, I noted themes that appeared to be repeated within the interview and across other interviews. In asking rather open ended questions and minimally guiding the conversation, I was thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new data.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Efforts were taken to ensure that the participants were treated respectfully and honestly. Before the initial interview, participants signed a permission form giving their permission for me to use the data gathered and alerting participants that interviews would be tape recorded. They were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time and also to disallow the use of the tape recorder. Because the reading levels of the participants was not known until after they had given permission to be included in the study, the form was discussed and read orally to them and this oral reading was tape recorded.

After the interviews had been transcribed and case studies written, I met again with each participant and together we checked the case study for accuracy. Participants were asked to choose a name other than their own to ensure anonymity and each was asked to alter or omit any information that could reveal her identity.

Four of the five participants met as a group to discuss the themes I had discovered across their case studies. A new permission form was signed by each participant giving permission for our group session to be videotaped. Because of the interactive nature of discussion in a group, transcription of the data would be more accurate if the session was video recorded rather than audio recorded. This group discussion was entirely optional and at the

beginning of the session, it was emphasized that they should only disclose information they felt comfortable divulging.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected in this study were analyzed in two ways. First, the interview data were transcribed and compiled into case study or vignette form. The second form of analysis was thematic. The data were examined for themes that were either repeated in other interviews or were of particular interest to me. Seventeen themes thus emerged from the second form of analysis.

Intercoder reliability with regard to the themes was over 80%. To ensure the validity or truthfulness of my interpretation of the data, the themes were presented to the women interviewed and the ensuing group discussion affirmed that the themes extracted were valid. The process of data analysis is described in greater detail in the next section.

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

A challenge facing qualitative researchers is to produce research that is both reliable and valid.

Reliability refers to the ability to replicate the research. Could another researcher, using the same methods, yield the same results? McNeill (1985) has said that there is always a danger in a method that involves a lone

researcher in a situation that cannot be repeated. The main challenge in reproducing this kind of research is the lack of objectivity of the researcher. This was certainly a consideration in my research but I am inclined to agree with the phenomenological school of thought, their belief being that the application of a traditional scientific paradigm where objectivity is paramount is not possible in an investigation of the life of another human being. The atmosphere set by the researcher and the quality of interaction before and during the interview are in part, a product of the interviewer's personality, background knowledge, values and beliefs. The direction of the conversation initiated by the interviewer is also determined by the values, beliefs, knowledge and personality of the interviewer. In addition, the moment of the interview is difficult to replicate as is the emotional state of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Giroux, (1981:102) has said that "(i)ntellectual inquiry and research free from values and norms are impossible to achieve". Thus, I would argue that the ability to replicate this research is not of paramount concern. The findings of this study are meant to be springboards to further social inquiry. It is hoped that by thoroughly documenting the methodology I employed, other researchers may use the methods I describe and perhaps similar themes may emerge.

Once the data were collected, reliability was built into the analysis. The question was then, could another researcher analyzing this data come up with

the same results? Miles and Huberman (1984) refer to this check on the consistency in data analysis as inter and intracoder agreement.

After the taped interviews had been transcribed a vignette for each woman was written and direct quotations from our interviews were utilized to form the core of each story. The data were examined for themes that either appeared across interviews or were of particular interest to me. These themes were illustrated using direct quotes from the participants. The data were displayed using a conceptually clustered matrix as described by Miles and Huberman (1984). Horizontal rows were assigned to each participant and vertical columns consisted of categories labelled by the students' own words. Cell entries consisted of direct quotes or paraphrases from the transcripts that illustrate the categories. The quotations from each vignette were then coded according to the categories outlined in the data display matrix. Approximately one week after my initial coding, I coded the data again and found that internal consistency was over 80%.

The next phase of ensuring reliability in analysing the data consisted of another independent researcher coding a portion of the data and then comparing the coding to mine. It was very important that I clearly define each of the themes so that the other researcher could analyze the data with the same understanding of the themes that I had. Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest that intercoder reliability of 70% is acceptable. It was found that intercoder reliability in this phase of analysis was well over 80%.

Validity is the truthfulness of the data collected. In interviewing, one can only hope that the data collected is true. Qualitative researchers advocate the use of "triangulation" as a means of checking the validity of information. This can be achieved by various means including double checking sources for corroboration, paraphrasing and re-asking, using a variety of data gathering techniques to elicit similar data. During the interviews, I employed several interviewing techniques that are devised to validate information. These included paraphrasing, re-asking and seeking clarification. After the data were analyzed and vignettes for each participant written, I sought further validation of the data by meeting again with each participant and editing the vignettes with her. Validation of the themes that I and an independent researcher had pulled from the data was further checked through the use of a validation process similar to that advocated by Stearns et al. (in Miles and Huberman, 1984) for developing propositions. The procedure was as follows:

1. I made an unstructured list of statements, in this case quotations from the vignettes, that emerged from coding the interviews.
2. I retained the more general and abstract statements and set aside specific instances.
3. In a group discussion I presented the statements as propositions to the women I interviewed and asked that they comment on the

truthfulness of the statements and what, if any, qualifications needed to be added.

4. I discarded confusing or untrue propositions and noted any explanations that emerged from step 3.

The specific instances that were "set aside" in step 2 were discussed with the women to whom they related to double check the truthfulness of this instance.

ASSUMPTIONS

I assumed that the information provided by the women I interviewed was the truth and that they were giving me as much information as they felt able to at this point in their lives. I also assumed that since they had an active role in this research through the editorial and validation processes, the accuracy of their stories was important to them.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEIR WORDS, THEIR WORLD

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the following five vignettes is to give the reader pictures of the lives of five different single mothers enrolled in full-time academic upgrading programs. The format of the vignettes consists of chronologically presented descriptions of the women's life histories before becoming academic upgrading students, descriptions of the challenges they faced as students and descriptions of triumphs they have experienced as students.

In retelling their life stories, I assumed a narrator's voice and built each story around quotations gained from interviews with each woman. I felt that the reality of the person was better communicated and the vignettes had a greater true to life feeling when the speaker's own language and method of expression were preserved.

The vignettes vary in length because the quantity and quality of information gathered from each woman varied. Quantity varied because some women were interviewed over a period of two years every three months. Others were interviewed only every six months. Also, some women gave more in-depth responses to my questions. The quality of responses was affected mainly by the personality of the woman interviewed. Some were extremely verbal and

did not hesitate sharing considerable detail. Others were less verbal and less inclined to elaborate on information they considered private. The participants in this study were instrumental in revising early drafts of the vignettes. My longterm association with the five women and my attempts to encourage them to have a voice in the formation of their stories resulted in increased trust between us and the subsequent sharing of richer information even as we revised their stories.

The order of presentation of the vignettes is somewhat arbitrary; however, I have presented the vignette which reflected the least positive response to upgrading first and that which reflected the most positive response last.

ADRIENNE

Adrienne is a 33 year old single mother of two children, Jeannette, age 5 and Jeffery, age 3. She was born in Winnipeg and attended school there until she was in grade 3. Her family moved to Edmonton and Adrienne found that "the learning system back in Winnipeg and learning system here were just totally different. I was totally lost." Her first exposure to elementary school in Edmonton was very negative. "The teachers were so understanding but the students ... The kids were really cruel ... I used to dread going to school every day because in Winnipeg we had to wear uniforms and my mother made me, I'll never forget, she made me wear this black tunic and this white blouse and tie and berets and the whole bit. I came to school like that the first day and all the kids laughed at me. ... And that wasn't required here and she (her mother) thought it was and when I got home I said, 'I don't want to go to school anymore'. And ever since then, I hated school. Every recess I'd go out crying and I'd go to each group and they didn't talk to me, that was in grade 4, grade 5 and grade 6. It was really treacherous." Adrienne had difficulty with elementary school work and failed grades two and four. She said that she "would classify myself as a slow learner because it was all through school" and recalls that at an early age she wore a patch over one eye and also wore glasses.

Adrienne described her home life as "...very happy and at times it was very stressful. I felt as though I was a neglected child because I was the middle

child born. ... there was still a lot of stress because you couldn't go to her (mother), you couldn't talk to her, I had to talk to friends or I had to talk to a counsellor or somebody. ... my parents were strict when I was young and when we had to do assignments, you got them done. And I can remember in school and in math my dad would be helping me but he was more of a menace to me than anything because all he would do is yell and scream and it would just, there would be just so much to handle the pressure was unbelievable and that's why I had a hard time ..."

In her junior high years, Adrienne was in special education classes. " Well I should have had special training earlier on. I was glad to take special education where the teachers took the time to help you. I couldn't keep up with the students in the regular class. I learned a lot." After junior high, she attended a vocational high school and completed grade 12 in the vocational program.

After completing school, Adrienne held a variety of jobs. These jobs included housekeeping in a nursing home, dietary aide and clerking in the meat department at a department store. Although she was earning above the minimum wage and enjoyed working with her fellow employees at the store, she had to leave because of poor health. "I had whooping cough flu, I coughed so hard that I couldn't breathe. Everything went haywire so I had to leave that job and my body couldn't stand working in a place like that, it was too

cold and then I worked in the fish counter and I couldn't stand the smell of the fish."

In 1976, Adrienne enrolled in a Work Assessment Training Program. This government sponsored program provided her with some training required to work in an office. She got a job with a government department and held this filing, clerking job for over six years. In April of 1983, Adrienne was married and soon afterward gave birth to her daughter. She left her job with the government to be at home with her child but was unable to stay at home because the income she could bring to the family was needed. "... then he (her husband) got fired from his job because he was away more than he was at his job. And I tried to find him work and everything, the havoc ... so our marriage was rocky right from day one." Adrienne held short term clerical jobs, that were funded through special government grants, with two other government departments. She also worked as a housekeeper. In order to improve her chances at securing a permanent position, Adrienne enrolled in a typing course. "I didn't realize ... that it was for people who had already previously done typing, it was just a refresher course. Well I just barely passed under the wire." She did not feel that her weak reading skills affected her ability to obtain employment. After the birth of her son, Adrienne was separated from her husband and relied exclusively on unemployment insurance for support. "I couldn't find a job, and I applied and applied."

Adrienne had a desire to learn French, partly because her mother is French-Canadian and also because she has some French speaking friends. While inquiring about continuing education French classes, it was recommended to Adrienne that she upgrade her reading, writing and math skills. In 1989, she began a full-time academic upgrading program. Her goals were to improve her education and secure a better paying job and to learn to speak French. "I didn't want to just be a filing clerk the rest of my life. If I did take upgrading or got somewhere, then I could have a better paying job and get on with life ... because a filing clerk is the lowest paying. Not so much the fact to make extra money, but just to make a better life for my children ... make it more rewarding for me and the kids."

Adrienne was not altogether satisfied with her decision to return to school. She was having difficulty surviving financially, coping with the stresses of her program and raising two children. "I know I need further upgrading but if I could make an income I wouldn't go back to school. ... I don't mind going to school, it's trying to keep up with all the assignments and getting everything done, the pressure, the headaches, ... it's a real struggle." Adrienne initially received no financial support from her ex-husband and he rarely saw the children; therefore Adrienne relied heavily on the support of her parents, fellow church members and government assistance.

Lack of time to do school assignments and the lack of time for herself were two major concerns expressed by Adrienne. "When the kids are in bed and

after the dishes are done and after the laundry is done then I sit down (to do homework)."

There were major changes in the academic upgrading program after Adrienne's first summer recess. The former, traditional, classroom program became a computer managed individualized program. Students worked independently on assignments prescribed by a computer. Small group tutorials and individual help from a classroom teacher were available upon request, but students worked mainly on their own. Initially, Adrienne reserved judgement on this new technology. "... at first I wasn't too sure because we weren't getting the help we needed but now we're supposed to be getting more computer time and individualized help so it's going to even out I think but I'm going to play it by ear." She lacked enthusiasm for returning to school and yet felt she had few other choices. An option offered by the academic upgrading program was to write a General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) exam after completing preparation for the exam through the computer managed program. Adrienne elected to participate in this option. "I didn't think I'd have to go back another term and I thought is school ever going to end? Like am I ever going to be able to go out and work? I'm getting tired of school but I think I need it for a little bit more yet. ... if I don't get it (General Equivalency Diploma) then I'll have to see about working for awhile, taking a job just to have a break cause I'm starting to feel sort of burned out, so to speak, going to school for so long." As the year progressed, Adrienne became more disillusioned with the computer

managed program. "But every job that I've applied for, I don't have my typing skills and any other job they want weekends or shift work. If I didn't have the children it would be ideal but I've got them to worry about, so I'm stuck here because I can't find a daytime job unless you have some skills. So I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. I can't find a daytime job. ... If I had a choice, I'd say 'to heck with these computers all together', cause even though they may be the technology of the future, you can learn in a class so much better than on the computer. I mean they're fine if you want to go to a computer program and you just need your typing. ... It's not pleasant for me to come here, for me it's a real chore. ... I hate being that way but that's how it's been since September. I thought it would be a challenge with the computers first. ... I bet I'd feel great if they didn't have those machines and just had morning and afternoon classes." Adrienne's main complaint about the program was that she felt she was not receiving the individualized help she needed. In addition to the stress at school, she was having difficulty raising her children. "...but he (her teacher) doesn't understand it when you're a parent and you have two small children, you've got enough responsibility, your housework and the kids and everything else, like you just can't have time for homework. It's midnight when I go to bed and 4:30 when I get up. I'm exhausted. ... Some days good and some days not so good. It depends, if I've had a hectic morning with the kids and then the whole day is just shot. It's hard. ... It's like I'm trying to make a better life for the kids and myself. I

want to rent a house and have another person, an adult person you know, to talk to at night when I put the kids to bed cause it gets very lonely and my parents don't seem to understand this." Adrienne did not complete the G.E.D. preparation course and did not write the exam.

During the summer break, Adrienne attempted to find employment. "I was trying to find work (during the summer) so I wouldn't have to go to school. ... I didn't want to go back cause I knew it was so tough, like going for so many subjects ... when I had so much homework to do every night, like I was just absolutely drained."

In September, 1990, Adrienne transferred to another institution offering academic upgrading. "... it's a lot better atmosphere. The other place is for the dogs. I'd never go back there. It took me three years to get in here cause I had to apply and then wait and then I got turned down, I don't know what for and I had changed my goal a couple of times". Although she was happier in the traditional classroom setting, she was still under stress from school and home. "... the last semester, from September to November, I had too much homework. Like I'd go to bed at one o'clock in the morning trying to keep up with assignments." She found that the criteria for funding were strictly enforced. "You have to take three courses otherwise you lose your funding. As of February of '91, if you flunk a course, you automatically lose your funding ... so you really have to be on your toes. Like that's \$35.00 every two weeks that I could lose and if I flunk it then I'm sort of helter skelter. ... I haven't

missed a day, they're really strict on attendance ... Like \$3.50 per day might not mean a lot to some people but for people like myself who are on assistance, it means a lot."

Stress at school comes mainly from being pushed through the program too quickly. "... it's quite pressured ... they push you through to get through your courses quickly, that's what I find. Like if they had their semesters structured from September to January and January to June, it might be better structured for us people who learn at a slower rate. But to go that fast, 10 weeks for one course, I found that to be just a bit too pushed. ...I feel like I'm learning something but at the same time being taught at too fast a pace to be able to grasp everything in all at once. Like they're barely skimming the surface, barely touching, getting through to the person. ... What I would like to see is their semesters changed. ... They say that the quicker they get the students out the better the person is. That's what their philosophy is anyway. ... I'm thinking for my own benefit for, there's a lot of people there that are slow learners and they just don't grasp it as fast as other people."

Adrienne found it difficult to support herself on under \$1000.00 per month. She paid \$495.00 per month for a three bedroom apartment, \$72.00 per month for her daughter to attend a Christian School, \$43.00 per month for her daughter's bus pass, and \$30.00 for after school care. "It leaves me short food wise quite often. ... I called the food bank and they've told me I have to go

through my social worker." Adrienne was appealing her Social Services allotment, an exercise she participated in and won three other times.

Due to a number of factors including stress, Adrienne's health deteriorated. She was on medication for asthmatic seizures and often fell asleep in class.

Caring for her children continued to be difficult for Adrienne. "Someone could take my kids any day, especially my daughter. She's started grade one and she's just a strong willed child and just really hard to handle. It's been rough, it hasn't been easy. She's got problems in school too. She doesn't listen, doesn't pay attention and I was just looking at her report card, the first of the year and she's not doing too well. ... If anyone could adopt her (daughter) I'd be happy. Like that's putting it bluntly and I hate to sound so harsh but she's nothing but a pain to get moving and if I just had my son it would be so much easier. ... If things don't get any better, I'm going to put Jeannette in a home for somebody from church to take care of her. I can't cope anymore." Adrienne has had a number of government agencies involved in helping her cope with parenting, but none seem to have made an impact. "They all seem to have closed my file and everything. I have one person come from Yellowhead Youth Centre, my worker, but he's not much help. He comes and lectures me every week ... I think I need to go back through Community Behavioral Services and get them (the children) on a program with them."

The church continued to be a strong influence in Adrienne's life. "Most of my activities revolve around the church. Like I go on Thursday nights, I go

there and then I go out for coffee once a week. That's my mother's time out, so to speak. And then if I get out on a Saturday, it's just for a service at church type of thing..." In order to have some time to herself, Adrienne has relied on church friends to take the children or she has prebooked a childcare worker from the YWCA.

In general, Adrienne found her academic upgrading experience to be stressful and difficult. I met Adrienne almost every three months for two years and in that time she did not mention any tangible or intangible effects of participating in academic upgrading. "Like I could use a job instead of going to school, it would really be to my benefit. I don't know if I'm going to stay here after August."

JANICE

Janice is a 29 year old female who grew up in the suburbs of Vancouver, B.C. She lived in the area for 15 years and attended school there. At the age of 5, Janice was the victim of family violence and lost one finger, the use of another finger and sustained head injuries. She was in a coma for 1 1/2 years and when she did return to school at the age of 7, she had to relearn many language related skills including reading. She does not remember many details of this period in her life, but feels she was not given much extra help as a student. "I can't remember a lot of my schooling because of my, like I had head injuries because of this accident, that's why I don't think I finished. It's cause I was slow and there's a lot I don't remember in school."

In addition to the challenges faced in school, Janice's home life was also difficult. Because her mother suffered from polio and had a nervous breakdown and her father worked away from home, Janice's brothers lived with relatives and Janice and her sister were placed in a foster home. They lived with this foster family on a farm for seven years. There were eleven boys in the family and Janice and her sister were called upon to do the housework. Janice felt that as a result of the "accident", as she called the act of family violence, and the subsequent family break-up, she became a child with behaviour problems. "And then I was really bad, I was a bad kid. And then I think it was just all the bad things that happened to me and then that

accident. Nobody else got hurt but me and I didn't feel that that was fair you know,..."

When she was 14, Janice lived with an aunt and uncle in another part of B.C.. This relationship became strained and Janice moved to a summer resort community outside of Edmonton, to live with another aunt and uncle. She attended junior high, grade eight in the nearby town but left home and school in that same year. Her relatives were alcoholics, therefore "I just wanted to get away from my aunt and uncle and that's why I got married. I was really young when I did that but I just wanted to get away and I felt that that was the only way out, cause I couldn't live alone because I would be too scared. ...they (aunt and uncle) didn't care if I quit or not so it was my decision so that was what I made. If they cared, I probably would have stayed because it wasn't that bad. Just that you know you're on your own and you think that that's the right thing at the time."

The next five years were characterized by a variety of jobs, most of which were obtained through friends. Janice married and began working as a waitress in a cafe owned by her mother-in-law. Shortly thereafter, and for the next two years, she drove a gravel truck and was trained "on the job". Her next job, which lasted for approximately eight months, was with a courier company. Her run was to and from Calgary every night "like from seven at night until five in the morning".

Janice moved to a small city north of Edmonton and worked as a cook's helper for approximately four months. She then began working as the assistant manager in the lounge at a local restaurant and stayed at this job for two and one half years. Janice felt that she did not ever have difficulty obtaining employment, "the only thing is you don't get paid enough to live off it." Janice gave birth to her daughter and two years later, divorced her husband. "It just didn't work out. I was young and he was young and we just and we get along right now, we have a good time. We just kind of got being apart so much too, we were just growing apart too." She remained in the small city for an additional two years, then moved to Edmonton.

Upon moving to Edmonton and for the next two years, Janice was unemployed because she underwent a number of operations including three operations on her injured hand. The surgery was successful, in that she then had some movement in her injured finger. The next five to six years, Janice was on Social Assistance between short term jobs in the service industry. The last job Janice had, before returning to school was as a maid for a housecleaning company.

In February of 1988, Janice visited a Career Centre Library in Edmonton with a friend who was working on a school assignment. As she browsed through the pamphlets, she decided that she should return to school because "...I wanted to get somewhere." Career Centre counsellors suggested that she consider secretarial work, but Janice felt that she "...was more into designing

and that kind of stuff... architect...". The most important reason for her returning to school was "To learn to read and write ... so that I can get a course or some kind of a course. It's like you can't go and take a course that you know you can't read and you can't write and you can't do a lot of things. So I think it's just to refresh myself." She felt that "I have a hard time comprehending things like if I don't read it thirteen times to understand it, then I won't remember it. Or if I read a novel, I have to read it over and over to get the point."

Over the two years that I communicated with Janice, there were major changes in the academic upgrading program she was involved in. The program changed from a traditional classroom setting, where students were grouped according to reading ability, to a computer managed, individualized program. Janice was absent for much of the beginning of the term because of a death in the family, but at the beginning of the computer managed program, she felt quite positive towards this new mode of teaching. "I find it's (the program) not too bad it's just that there's a lot of just work by yourself and you don't have a lot of teacher's help which I kind of need a lot of right now cause I'm still in my reading I have a lot of problems." The main positive aspect of this new mode of instruction, "... is the fact that you can go on if you're done. Like I don't want to be tied back because there's three other people or are people in the class that doesn't know. Or there's me you know, and I don't know and these people are holding back because of that and that's not fair."

Janice stated that she would like to learn more about actually operating the computer. "... you push about ten buttons and that's all ... and I think we should know a little more. Like I think we should know something about the computers, what those letters are for and stuff. Cause there's a lot of buttons and what if you do push them, you could really, I don't know if you could really wreck the system or ..."

Despite a very tragic few months at the beginning of the fall term, when Janice's foster brother died, Janice was initially very positive about the effect that returning to school had had on her life. She and her daughter were becoming more involved with community activities like Brownies and swimming. She felt better about herself and her life. "I'm a lot happier, I'm easier to get along with as I hear from other people and I care more. Like I care if I get up and I haven't had my shower and cleaned up before I went. My self is a lot better."

Janice's initial positive response to the computer managed program changed over the school term. She became very frustrated with this mode of instruction. "... cause I want classes. I mean, if I wanted to take correspondence, I'd take correspondence. You know, and that's exactly what this seems to be. ... it sounded good at the time but now that you go into it for awhile, you know everybody's dropping out it seems." She attempted to attend full-time during the day and take night classes as well, but this was too much for her. "I was never at home and she (her daughter) was starting to really act

up really a lot and I was having a hard time doing that and raising her so I think just going a full day is enough."

The program, in its initial stages, was going through many changes as the teachers, administration and students were attempting to adapt to the new technology. Unfortunately, for Janice, the adaptations were moving too slowly. "Why are they waiting? You know, I don't want to wait anymore. I want to get out of here and get to high school. ... I'm kind of just passing my time until something happens." Her initial positive reaction to upgrading changed over the term as she grew more frustrated with the new approach to literacy instruction. Her frustration with the program made it difficult for her to see any benefits in her life as a result of upgrading her education. "... it just makes me frustrated." Janice was seeing a family counsellor because of difficulties she was now beginning to experience with her daughter. She also began a weekly paper route so that she could get some exercise and have some time to herself. A feeling of deep frustration seemed to permeate any conversation with regard to her upgrading program. "... I don't want to give up because I've done it for so long now that it's hard. ... I don't feel (any differently about herself) unless I'm doing something and I'm achieving something."

It had been recommended to Janice to attend the upgrading program through the summer months in order to improve her reading comprehension and prepare for high school entry the following fall. Her daughter would be staying with her paternal grandmother for one month during the summer not

only so that Janice could attend the summer program but also because Janice felt that she "just need(s) a break". Her relationship with her daughter was becoming more strained and her daughter was having difficulty accepting a new male friend in Janice's life.

Despite Janice's frustration with the new computer managed program and the challenges she faced with her daughter, she reemphasized that upgrading her education had made her a different person. "I'm happier and more relaxed, well sometimes ... I want to improve my life where before it never mattered before. Now I know what I want to do. I just want things to be going, improving, not just sitting at a standstill."

DARLENE

Darlene is a 32 year old female single parent of a 10 year old male and an 8 year old female. She was born in a city in northern Alberta and her native language is English. Her father was in the Canadian Armed Forces; therefore, the family moved every 3 to 5 years. They lived in New Brunswick, Manitoba and Germany. Darlene felt that the frequent moves and accompanying adjustments to new schools did make it difficult for her to learn to read. She did not remember repeating any grades but, after grade six and at the request of her mother, she was put into a program for slow learners. Darlene attended school until she was 16 years old and had completed half of grade 9. At the time, she felt that she was having a great deal of difficulty learning and because many of her friends were quitting school in order to work, she did the same. "It was the thing to do."

She remained at home and worked in a restaurant as a dishwasher, waitress and cook for four years. She did not find her low literacy skills caused problems for her on the job. As a waitress, she wrote in "waitress's shorthand" and she was never asked by her employer if she could read or write.

Darlene claimed that most of her friends did not realize she had problems reading. "They go, 'I didn't know you can't read, you hide it well'. And you know, you do, you learn to hide it."

Darlene's son was born when she was 21. She had a job cleaning vacated apartments while her son was an infant, but was unable to keep this job

because of difficulty finding childcare. Darlene's daughter was born two years later and for the next seven years, Darlene stayed at home raising her children.

When Darlene's children were old enough to attend school, Darlene found that being at home was "boring". "Sitting around the house doing nothing, I got to the point where the corner needed to be cleaned up and I'd do it later and I was just getting tired of sitting there not doing nothing. It was nice to be home to say goodbye to my children, nice to be home to say hello at lunch or when they'd come home from school, but you know, in between, what do you do? ... And I don't like soap operas."

A friend of hers, who was attending an upgrading program recommended Darlene return to school. She applied and was placed on a two year waiting list to attend the full-time upgrading program. In the meantime she attended a part-time literacy program offered in her community school. She only attended this program for a short time because she felt that she was not learning what she had wanted to learn.

Upon entering the full-time program, Darlene's goals were to achieve the necessary prerequisites to enter a food preparation course at AVC and later to study cooking at NAIT. "It's like to see however I'm going. If I'm good, like food prep is only grade 9 and I'm at a grade 6,7,8. around there, depending on what subject it is. But if I'm doing really good and I work up, I'm going right to grade 12. Cause I still have 20 years left (to work) so I may as well go right

up." She was asked whether she returned to school in order to help her children with their school work and she replied, "...I'm selfish in a way. I want to learn, I want to learn with my children and if it does come ... my son's in grade 5 and his math I can't help him with. I'd like to help him but I think it's more of, I'm coming because I want to learn. I think it's more for me than that I'd like to help my children."

Since beginning her classes, Darlene noted many changes in her life. She found herself reading newspapers and books and the notes that her children brought home from school. "Like I'm reading notes from school from the teachers now. Before I'd say, O.K., a note from the teacher. I'd put it away until my mom came into town or until a friend came over and say, would you read this for me? I'm reading them now. Sometimes I don't understand them. (If) I don't understand it, I phone the secretary at the school and she's very helpful. ... You know what I did (before the literacy classes)? I'd say to my children, I lost the note and I don't know what it was about and then my children would explain it to me."

In addition to reading the notes that teachers sent home from school, Darlene was also attending parent/teacher interviews on her own. "... my daughter has a learning disability and I have an appointment with her teacher tomorrow and in the last few years, I've had my mom with me so tomorrow, I'm going by myself."

Darlene was now also able to do her own banking and found pleasure in the fact that she was reading the jackets of videos that she planned to rent. She was called upon to be a spokesperson for other literacy students in a documentary special on television and wrote an article for a local newspaper.

"... I want people to know that like they said I was 31 with two children, learning to read.... I want people to know that are the same age as me, maybe a little bit younger maybe older, that you can actually go out and learn and I mean that's what I feel because there is a lot of people that I know still that can't read and say, well I can't go back to school."

Darlene also noted changes in her mental attitude as a result of returning to school. "... I'm not down as much. Before (returning to school) I was down on everything and I was tired because I wasn't doing anything. And my kids were getting on my nerves. They're on my nerves, but they're not as bad now."

She felt that the routine of school forced her to make better use of her time. "... I'm not as lazy. I'm getting my housework done and you know I was sitting here all day not doing nothing. You know, and I was getting so depressed just sitting there not doing nothing all day. And I'd be glued to the T.V. and I'd be not dressed at 3 and you know but now I'm doing more. I like going out and walking. I'm getting up early with the kids like before I'd get up and just lay down on the couch. ... I think it's because of the responsibility that I have to be here every day and that it's something that I wanted so because I wanted it, I have to keep it up."

Near the end of her first year in the full-time program, I again met with Darlene to discuss the impact of academic upgrading on her life. Her initial goal of grade 9 had changed to grade 12. "... I'm having fun learning and doing it and I figure I may as well do right up to grade 12 you know instead of just at grade 8 cause I might say, maybe I don't want to be just a cook or a chef and I'll have to start going to school again. So this way I'll have my grade 12 and if I decide that years down the road, I don't want to be a chef, then I've got an education."

Darlene's personal life had been difficult for most of the term. A doctor had prescribed sleeping pills, nerve pills and high blood pressure pills. Darlene was also diagnosed as suffering from diabetes. In addition to health problems, Darlene experienced severe emotional upheaval as a result of family violence. She asked that the specifics of this upheaval not be revealed in this study.

A major challenge for Darlene was attendance. Her daughter had broken her foot, and Darlene missed more school than was allowed by the institution. Due to the circumstances, an exception was made in her case and she was allowed to remain in the program.

Because Darlene's children were in school at the same time as Darlene, she did not have to concern herself with providing child care. However, when they were ill, she stated that, "... most of the time the kids went to school sick, except for the odd time. ... when they got home, I just loaded them with medicine..."

Darlene found that her children are very supportive of her efforts at school.

"... mine (my children) think it's cute. ... my daughter's excited. You know if we've got homework, we do it together." Being a student has served as an example to her children. "My daughter always loved school so, my son has, cause he was going through this phase where 'When I turn 16, I'm going to quit, everybody else is doing it'. And I'm going, 'Well education is important', and now he realizes it. Cause he sees my mistakes and stuff like that. He says, 'I'm going to go to grade 12, no matter what I'm going to go to grade 12'."

Darlene does not want to remain on Social Assistance. "I didn't want to sit on welfare for the rest of my life. I don't want that and I'm scared of this generation repeating itself. Because I know this old woman that she was on welfare all her life and now her daughter is on welfare and their kids are on welfare and I'm going, 'I don't want that'. You know, I don't want my children finding out the easy way out. I can go on welfare and sit around and do nothing for the rest of my life. I don't want that." She is an advocate of education for single mothers and would encourage any single mother considering upgrading to try it. "There's always a way of going about it. Like there's government places to help you. Child Welfare is helpful. People are scared of Child Welfare but they shouldn't be, they're out there to help. ... If you feel that you need school and you have children, you can do it. You put your mind to something, you can do it. ... I've been out of school for 20 years

and I did it and I'm sitting back and going, 'ah ha', where a few years ago I would have said, 'no, I can't do that'."

JEANNETTE

Jeannette is a 22 year old female single parent of a one year old male. She was born and raised in Edmonton and experienced a very difficult childhood. She was considered a slow learner and attended a special school for slow learners and mentally handicapped children. Through mental abuse from her mother and sexual abuse from her mother's boyfriend, Jeannette lacked positive self esteem and became convinced that she was mentally handicapped.

After completing the program at the special school, Jeannette began a program at a vocational junior/senior high school which is designed to accommodate children who do not fit into the regular school system because they are slower learners or are experiencing behaviour management problems. Jeannette was overwhelmed by this institution and quit school early in the term. For the next seven years, Jeannette was either on social assistance or worked in the fast food service industry. "I worked for seven years when I quit school and I know how hard it is when you don't have enough (education) and how you make it. Like you try to make it day by day but it's just so hard."

Because it was difficult to support herself on her limited income, Jeannette shared accommodations with a fellow employee. Jeannette made a conscious decision to become pregnant because she felt she needed "someone to love me". Her boyfriend would not support her through her pregnancy and her roommate took advantage of their friendship and stole Jeannette's earnings. Feeling alone, Jeannette turned to her boyfriend's mother for support. Four months

into her pregnancy, Jeannette was no longer physically able to work. She relied on Social Assistance and her boyfriend's mother (hereafter known as "mom") to support her. During her pregnancy, Jeannette began planning the life she wanted for herself and her child. She recognized that to have a career or a job with which she could earn enough income to support her family, she would need to upgrade her academic skills. She wanted to begin working when her child began school, therefore she began the upgrading program when her son, Andy, was only six months old.

As a single parent of an infant, Jeannette's main challenge as a student was finding acceptable childcare. During the first six months of the academic upgrading program, Andy had had four different caregivers. It was extremely stressful for Jeannette to leave him in childcare situations that she did not feel completely comfortable with but she felt she had little choice. "I don't want to have to drop him off and leave him and he's screaming blue murder and I'm just sitting there teary. Why do I have to do this?" She removed him from one daycare when she found marks on him that indicated he had been bitten by another child. The childcare situation she subsequently found was inconvenient but she felt comfortable with the care Andy was receiving. She would leave her home at 6:00 A.M. to catch a bus to the far southwest part of the city where Andy's dayhome was. She would then take another bus from the dayhome to the upgrading program in the city centre and arrive by approximately 8:30 A.M.. Her first class did not start until 10:00 A.M.,

therefore she used the morning to do her homework. "Cause that's the only time I'd usually get. You know at night it's busy with him, even though he's going to bed earlier, I have to do the laundry, clean up the house, do my homework. No time to watch T.V. you know like, it's funny this year I haven't had my T.V. on more than 10 hours."

Another challenge Jeannette faced, was missing classes because of having to stay home with Andy when he was too ill to take to childcare. "... I was too scared to miss too much (school).... like I have no back-up when he's in daycare so he's only got one person and I don't know much people ... Like I stayed home when his fever was high but I'd sent him to daycare when he had the amonia (sic) and everything when his temperature was low, I'd take him back but when it was high, I stayed home with him because I had to, I just had to."

Jeannette noted that since she started the upgrading program, she lost contact with many of her old friends, some because she was too busy with parenting and schooling but some because she felt they were jealous of her changing life. She stated that "... you can't really depend on your friends, you can only depend on your family to be able to support you."

Jeannette's goals changed since she began her upgrading program. In order to secure provincial government funding, she was required to state an occupational goal. She felt she should achieve grade 12 and become a secretary. "... she asked me what I wanted for a career and I said like I don't know yet, like I wrote down secretary cause we had to and but I says I want

my grade 12 really badly. ... it's hard for my counsellor to understand that but I says I want it for me like more than I want it for my son. I just want to prove to myself, inside myself that I was able to do it."

In later interviews, Jeannette's goals changed somewhat. The counsellor noted that Jeannette needed a grade 10 education to become a secretary but Jeannette was determined to achieve grade 12 "...cause I know you can't go anywhere without your grade 12 and what if I'm not interested in secretary?" Her occupational goal changed to further education in the dental assistant's program.

Another source of motivation for Jeannette was to get off of Social Assistance and be a positive role model for her son and "Mom's" children. "... my natural mother was on welfare and now I am ... my background and my family, every single person is on welfare and what a life to bring up in your kids. I don't want him (her son) to see, well that's the easy way out. ... he's ("mom's" son) failing this year cause he doesn't like to study and he goes, I'm not going to finish. And I says, you want to end up like me. He says, well, I'm a boy. And I says, so you can go and get somebody pregnant get stuck with them and get married and you'll stay on welfare. I says, it doesn't matter ... you're going to end up like me, I don't want that for you. ... she ("mom's" daughter) wants to quit but I just tell her ("Mom"), don't let her do it cause that's exactly what's going to happen if you don't (finish school), and you're going to end up on welfare."

Returning to school changed Jeannette's life from one of dependence on her "mom" to a greater feeling of self-confidence. "I don't have to phone my friend or my mom everytime I have a problem, I can't fill out this form or I can't do this. ... I don't depend on anybody else ... I have confidence and if I make a mistake when they look over the form, they just say this is wrong and I go, I'm sorry and they don't make any fun over me."

Jeannette also noted that she now enjoys increased self esteem. "I think I feel better about me. I think more about me, you know I think about other people but it, just like I'm on this earth for a reason, you know I'm doing something for me. ... You grow stronger inside though. When you're under a lot of stress, and you just want to sit there and cry and cry, you can't because you're sitting in a class and you don't just want to sit there and bawl and bawl. ... The more under stress you are, it makes you stronger because there has to be a reason why I have to do this and it's going to maybe take three years to see the progress. And "Mom's" telling me how much I've changed. Now you're thinking like you love yourself back. You know, you don't hate yourself any more. You want to look at yourself in the mirror. You want to have your hair done nice, put make-up on, you feel good about yourself ... Being able to talk to people, to know what's going on in the world. Be able to do things by myself ... like my mind is more open, now I can see the world and see what maybe I'm going to become."

Jeannette found that she was better able to involve her son in literacy activities now that her reading had improved. "I'm trying to read to Andy now and trying to read to myself. ... And like with him speaking now, he's having more words now ... and I try and correct him ... if I have a good vobalary (sic) he will. He will pick up how I speak and I don't want him to speak like I do because it will just screw him up when he goes to school ... I don't want him to have problems with speaking as much as I do."

JESSICA

Jessica is a 40 year old female of French descent. The third of five children, she was born and raised on a farm in Alberta. She attended school in a nearby small town. French was spoken at home and, until the fifth grade, all of her formal education was in French.

In grade six, classes were taught in English. While in grade six, Jessica became ill and missed eight months of school. When she returned to school, she was placed in a grade seven class and was unable to handle the academic requirements.

Jessica's mother attended a French language school in Quebec for 8 years. Her father completed three years of education. Neither parent was able to help Jessica with her school work. Her father felt that at age 14 she should leave home and, "... he says 'You're old enough now, now you get out there and work.'" She was unable to secure help from her older sister because she "...was so wrapped up with trying to achieve her goal by finish (sic) school and get the heck out." She was also unwilling to seek assistance from an older brother because of "...an experience I had with him when I was nine years old." Jessica claimed that she did not have friends while in school. She said, "They didn't want nothing to do with me."

That year, her father retired from farming and the family moved to Edmonton. The only program Jessica could enroll in was a vocational high school program. As a student in this program, Jessica felt that she was not

given much extra help. " At times I would (get) help but she (teacher) would say, 'Get it done and if it's wrong, I'll help you the next day.' And the next day would never show up."

While still in school at age 17, she became pregnant. "I didn't really want to leave school. I wanted more of an education but I was in a situation where I was pregnant and so I had no choice." She married the father of her soon to be born child. Unfortunately, the child did not live.

Shortly after losing her baby, Jessica enrolled in a sewing program at a technical college. Her goal was to become a seamstress. She completed the first basic course "with flying colours" but was unable to complete the next two levels because her husband was transferred to western Ontario.

While in Ontario, Jessica had another child, a boy. She did not pursue her career as a seamstress, but rather decided that "...I'm going to be a housewife, learn the trade and the things that a housewife should learn. I learned how to cook, how to do lots of crafts so I really got busy. ... I was there at home and ... I wasn't really thinking, well I need to go to work, cause I was really busy." Jessica and her family lived in western Ontario for three and one half years until the company her husband worked for declared bankruptcy. The family decided to move back to Alberta and settle in a small city outside of Edmonton.

Jessica's second son was born. He was mentally handicapped and thus required much attention from Jessica. She spent the next two years caring for Johnnie at home and making numerous trips to the a hospital in Edmonton

where he underwent physiotherapy. "...I learned a lot by observing these people there, because how they were working with my son, I had to do the same at home so it took an effort and time for me to deal with that type of learning because I didn't know anything about this." At age three, Johnnie was accepted into a full-time day program at a special school for handicapped children. Since Jessica's older son, Barry, was already in elementary school, Jessica decided to find a job.

For the next three years, Jessica worked as a waitress. "Facing the public was a challenge for me but what I really wanted to do was be in the public getting to know, hey, what's out there?" She left her job as a waitress because, " I thought, it's time for me to find something better cause I couldn't stay waitressing and I knew the ropes there, like you meet a lot of people, different people and I just wanted something better so I got into sales clerk."

Jessica spent the next three and one half years employed as a clerk at a department store. She found the work enjoyable because "... that again was with the public and I had a department and that was lingerie, and I really liked that because I like sexy things. They put me in the right place." Working in a department store also presented challenges to Jessica. She was called upon to cover for other clerks who were ill and often was responsible for two departments, a changing room and the cash register. She was responsible for staff under her, locking up the store and transferring money from the till to the safe and back again when she worked the night shift. Her lack of

education hindered her from advancing beyond the clerk position. "I didn't have enough math to get further ahead, because I could have turned around and done the paperwork in the office and they didn't think I would be able to do that because I was dealing with a lot of money. I respected them for that, I knew that I didn't have it." She left this job that she enjoyed because of rumours that a fellow employee was after her position. After she left the store, she was called back by management and accused of authorizing unauthorized expenditures for the store. She claimed to be innocent, a victim of a frame-up by the assistant manager. "... this is why I left ... store, because today I would probably still be there and enjoy my work, cause I really enjoyed it."

Jessica indicated that she coped well with reading, writing and speaking on the job. "Now the amount of worth that I taught how to speak English was mainly through my husband helping me throughout the mistakes that I would come up to say. And other people, that were not friends but acquaintances, to me they would say, 'You should say this'. ... And I've just figured, well, I'm in the public and if I do, if I make a mistake while saying something, someone will correct me. I will appreciate the person correcting me, not saying, 'You know, are you dumb?' ... Just correct my mistake and I'll try to remember how to say it next time. ... If I had any problems, the manager was there or the assistant manager was there and the co-workers were there."

After leaving the department store, Jessica worked for a short time in a small kitchen and glass shop. "... I went to work with a fellow that I didn't

really particularly like. He was one of these guys that, well a pretty lady well, ha, ha, we'll stick her around the back and do whatever." She only stayed at this job for a few months.

Jessica did not have great difficulty finding a job. She said, "I was always told by people, talking to people, if you look presentable and you look pretty, they're going to hire you. ...I would like to get into this position and I'm good with people. I'll prove that to you', and that sort. 'Just give me a chance.' And I never had any problems."

Jessica and her family were forced to sell all their possessions because of back taxes owed to the government by her husband. They moved to another city to "start something better".

Again, Jessica worked as a sales clerk in a clothing store. She was not comfortable working there and lacked respect for the manager. She described how businessmen would come into the store thinking she was the manager. "I says, only I wish". Jessica felt that personal appearance was very important and felt that the manager was determined to get rid of Jessica by cutting her hours. While describing her dilemma to Johnnie's teacher, the teacher mentioned a position in a handicapped person's residence that Jessica might apply for.

Jessica applied and got the job in the residence. At first she was on call and later was assigned the night shift. Her responsibilities included taking care of eight children, dressing them, cooking for them and making sure that they

went to the bathroom on time. "It was really, really exciting and interesting. And it gave me what it would be like for me to work at a place like this." Again, Jessica's lack of education held her back from advancing on the job. "... just before I was getting really good I needed more knowledge. Like courses and ... they said 'these course(sic), you won't be able to handle the course because of your education. You need more education'. I says, 'Oh gosh, now what?'" So they kind of left me there to kind of help but not to (get) into the good stuff. The good stuff wasn't for me because of my lacking of education. I understood that and I accepted it."

Coping with everyday life was not a problem for Jessica. "It doesn't take much to handle everyday situations, it's just that sometimes it's complicated but you get to talk to one person and they put you in another situation where you get to talk to another person, you solve your problem."

While working at the residence, Jessica's world changed dramatically. "And that's when my whole life came to an end too because my husband did not like me working shift work. ... he figured that I had too many people that he didn't like there. He thought they were all idiots, that I didn't know how to pick friends ... and he asked me for a divorce. ... So he rules out 20 years of marriage."

Jessica moved back to Edmonton with Johnnie. Barry, who was by now almost 17, lived with his father and completed high school. Upon completing high school, he moved to a small town in southern Alberta to work full-time at

a grocery store. Jessica and her husband have joint custody of the two boys, but Jessica's husband rarely sees Johnnie. Jessica was on Social Assistance when she moved to Edmonton to try to build a life on her own. It was very difficult to try to socialize with other men again. "... but where does someone go out and I haven't done it. And I said how do you go about doing it. I was kind of lost how." Jessica received Family Relief so that she could take a few holidays, one to visit her sister and another to visit friends. It seemed that slowly, her self confidence grew to the point where she was able to tell her husband, " I got problems but hell, I'm going to get hold of them. You know, I'm not going to turn around and bloat in the corner and hide myself away from people, no way, I'm not that kind of person. ... Divorce is a divorce. And I had a hell of a time trying to deal with the marriage when I was married to you and I ain't going back."

While on her own, she met a man 10 years older than herself and had a relationship with him. They lived together with her son Johnnie for five months but the relationship ended when he became jealous and possessive of her. "I guess I needed to get hurt again."

Again, Jessica was faced with being on her own with Johnnie and being on Social Assistance. She requested and was allowed to stay on Social Assistance for a month without having to look for work. "... I need a month of not concentrating on finding a job or nothing because I'm really down and I would like to turn around and learn how to pick myself up again. ... I don't want to

be on Social Assistance. So when I came back, I went and looked at the ads in the paper right away and I got a job working for"

Her job involved housekeeping and visiting with older or disabled people. She was unable to continue with this job because she found the people she was to care for depressing or very difficult to handle. "I'm going to go bananas if I continue. ...I said, 'You know, I don't know if I can handle this or not. I would like to think I can but I'm beginning to find that those people are going to put me in a depressed area where I don't want to be in.'"

When asked why Jessica considered returning to school, she said, " I just woke up one day and said, 'It's time for me to look at myself. What do I have? Do I go back waitressing? Do I go back (to) saleswork? Do I go to a place where I might not really like to be there? ... What do I have left?'" Because of coaching from a cousin and the support of her social worker, Jessica took a leave of absence from work and visited the Career College. A counsellor at the college suggested she should consider upgrading her education by returning to an academic upgrading program. Jessica desperately wanted to work. " I want a job, I don't want to stay on Social Assistance. All the jobs that I know, that I've dealt with in the past, they're not going to support me. I won't make enough money to support myself." In addition to wanting to earn enough income to support herself in the present, Jessica was concerned about her future. " ... my son is not going to stay with me for the rest of his life. ... he needs a one to one base. And I could provide that for him if I didn't care about

myself. I've got 25 years or maybe to live more working out in the public and this is what I'd like to do. I'd like to, by the time I reach 65 years old, I (would) like to have a decent pension. Then I can say, 'O.K. I've earned this.' And getting away from social assistance because sure, it's a good thing to have these people around but hell, you don't want to stay there the rest of your life. There's too many people that ... feel just that way, they say, 'they're going to give me the money'. I says, 'no, I'd like to earn my money'. I've learned that in the past and I'm going to continue doing it."

I first met Jessica when she was enrolled in a part-time literacy program and hoping to qualify for full-time studies in the next semester. Jessica's original goals were to complete grade 12 and work in an office. "I want to see myself with grade 12 and training where I could turn around and be in position where I don't have to worry about Social Assistance at all. ... I've always liked to type, (and) never had the opportunity. I have the opportunity now to do just that. My goal and career is that I want to be in an office where I can type."

As a student and single parent, Jessica found that life was often very challenging. A major obstacle for Jessica was trying to support herself on Social Assistance while in school. She was trying to live on \$780.00 per month. "When I get my cheque at the end of the month, the first thing I do is the phone bill gets paid, the rent gets paid, cable gets paid and then, once those are done, if I could do my kind of running around and finding out, O.K. if I can

put money away and kind of keep this for that, but the rest will have to wait until next month. ... You just don't have enough money to work with. You're always running out... as soon as I finish with what I need to sort out the money, I'm left with \$20.00 left from the rest of the month. What do I do? It's really, really hard. How do you live like that? You can't."

She was receiving approximately \$300.00 per month from her ex-husband as child support, but social services was deducting the amount from her social assistance cheque as the \$300.00 was considered as extra income. When Jessica first started school, her mentally handicapped brother was also living with her. He was relatively independent in that he worked and was receiving a support allowance through a trustee. However, Jessica found that she had to assume a motherly role with him. She had to bathe him and remind him of personal hygiene so that he would be presentable at work. As he was only two years younger than Jessica, there was sometimes conflict.

Jessica found that living on social assistance was a challenge when there are "extras" to pay for. She was given a car by her mother but now had to face paying for registration, licences, insurance, gas and car repairs. Often, money for these extras came out of her food budget. "I eat, but I don't eat tremendously, but my son eats twice as much as I do, and my brother, living with me eats twice as much as the two of us put together. When you look at buying your stuff at the store, \$200.00 (what was budgeted for food) doesn't go very far."

The stress of living on Social Assistance, dealing with her 15 year old mentally handicapped son and her brother resulted in a mental breakdown for Jessica. The straw that broke the camel's back came when she discovered her apartment was infested with cockroaches. A doctor prescribed medication for her and instructed her to slow down and relax. "Right, you can't stop try to relax. Sure it would be nice to relax. The relief, oh God, you know. How the devil do you do that when you have all kinds of crazy problems?" She managed to find a different apartment, pull herself back together and continue on with a very challenging life. But to Jessica, going to school was "like a dream come true."

Although we kept in contact, it was four months later that I actually sat down with Jessica again to discuss her life as a student and single mother. There had been changes in her life. Her brother no longer lived with her but she was having difficulty dealing with her mentally handicapped son. He had experienced challenges in school and doctors prescribed a calming medication for him. Jessica was also pursuing placing Johnnie in a group home. Waiting lists for group homes were very long, so she was also investigating foster care for him. "He's sixteen ... and I can't hold on to him. I got to look at my life too, before too long I'm going to be probably too old to work again. But the main thing that I would like to achieve is my grade 12 and whatever happens after that happens." Both options, the group home or a foster family, were difficult for Jessica to accept. Despite the fact that alternate care for Johnnie was not

a certainty, Jessica felt she had to prepare for a change in her own status as far as Social Services was concerned, since she would receive little notice when Johnnie was eventually placed. She would no longer be a single mother with dependents, rather a single woman without dependents. Her rent allowance would be reduced to \$215.00 per month and she would have to move to a less expensive apartment and probably find a part-time job or find a room-mate.

In addition to her concern for Johnnie, her older son decided to quit the job he'd had since he was 15 and move to eastern Canada with his girlfriend. "It's just the idea that they are so far away. That's going to be the hard part to deal with."

Jessica's academic goals did not change over the four month period but it appeared that goals beyond high school were beginning to crystallize from being "in an office where I can type" to working on a computer in an office setting. "What I thought of doing is that once I get my grade 12, to be trained to work on a computer because I'm not, I can't say I'm young, young any more and ten years, twenty years is going to fly really fast so by the time I get something really worthwhile that I really would like it and the money is O.K. that I can, say support myself and whatsort and whatever then, that's the thing that I'm really want to do."

Since Johnnie was still with her, a continuing challenge for Jessica was child care for him. During the regular school year, Johnnie spent his time in special classes. He had to leave for school on his own and Jessica relied on neighbours

to check on him and lock the apartment door when he left. He was able to be on his own for a short time but Jessica often worried about being late. She was also concerned about finding appropriate care for him during the upcoming summer break since her efforts at placing him in a group or foster home had not yet materialized. " I have a problem for someone to look after Johnnie. For somebody in the paper, there's a whole pile of names of people with phone numbers and everything else but they're people from the street. The minute you say that your son is handicapped and 16 years old, they're looking at a teenager. 'We don't want to look after a teenager, we want a little baby'. 'O.K. fine, no problem'. In that direction I haven't solved it. Social Assistance, I'm sure they're not going to let me sit at home they'll want me to go to work. ... I would go back to waitressing, go back to sales but if I went back to sales clerk the first thing that they'll do is that they'll put you on but you work at night. I can't work at night. Especially if I need somebody at home. They expect me to. It's bad enough to go out in the day where he's home, like right now he's at school and there's no problem. But once he's at home all day long and mom's not around, then what?"

Because of the difficulty of finding out of school care for Johnnie, Jessica was unable to socialize with her classmates or participate in social organizations. Summer school was offered for the first time in the academic upgrading program and Jessica expressed a desire to participate. She thus made arrangements for programs for Johnnie through the summer months. She

arranged for him to have a Big Brother and participate in summer camps through the ACT centre. Family Relief, another service organization, was to provide a home for him for two weeks and another service organization agreed to send a child care worker to Jessica's home for an additional two weeks.

Jessica also made special arrangements for Johnnie at school. She was dissatisfied with the program and the teacher at his school and through visits and phone calls with the principal, was able to secure an aide for him and speech therapy. Still dissatisfied with the school, she arranged for him to attend another school and secured bussing for him. Despite her limited education, Jessica made arrangements on her own. "... it was just an ordeal, but I've dealt with this for so long that I knew that if I don't get in today, I'll get in tomorrow"

My next interview with Jessica was at the end of June, shortly before the summer recess was to begin. Some of the challenges Jessica faced in the spring seemed to have worked out, but there were new challenges to face.

Jessica's health had declined during the school year and she was finally diagnosed as suffering from a form of arthritis. She received medication which alleviated pain but made her drowsy most of the time. The main recommendations made by her doctor were that she should avoid stress and eat a well balanced diet, both of which were very difficult to accomplish while on Social Assistance. "How do you eat properly when you don't have enough money to buy food? This is how I look at it."

She also learned that Johnnie would be placed with a foster family at the end of August. "This will probably take a lot of pressure off because then I would be able to concentrate more on my school which at night, it's hard to concentrate because he's always around and he's always asking what he wants where the T.V. is on and I have to shut myself away from the T.V. to do homework." Jessica appeared confident that the family Johnnie would be placed with would provide a good home for him but "he's so attached to me that that's the thing that he has to let go and it's going to be so hard for him because he's been, he's had so many changes in the past. After the divorce, it was even worse because in a year's time I must have moved three times. And that's terrible. It was hard for me but you can imagine how hard it is for someone who doesn't know and understand what the heck is going on."

Jessica also became involved with a married man who lived outside of Edmonton. She felt that he might support her if he moved into the city. At this point, it seemed that the only way to achieve financial stability was to give up her independence and enter into another relationship with a man who could support her. "I like being independent but I don't have enough knowledge to look at life (tears and crying)...And having someone that has done a lot of you know having income, coming in all the time and making sure that the bills are paid and at the same token having enough money to go places, to go travelling, well this is what I really want but I don't, I can't see myself succeeding that way on my own. I'd have to be in school for a lot of years and I don't have all

the years. I want to go to school where I could get a job where the pay is good, decent, that I could live, not having a lot of money but to live. And doing what I'm doing now, it's heading me in that direction but in a very slow manner. And I don't have all the years"

Jessica relied heavily on her mother for personal support. Although she is elderly, she provided emotional support for Jessica through her divorce and subsequent health problems. She also provided some financial assistance. "I don't know if I could have done it without her, I really don't. And she's the only one."

School was a constant in Jessica's otherwise tumultuous life. She considered attending the full-time upgrading program like having a job. "But I love it, I really do. It's like a job you know. It's like coming home with paperwork. That's exactly how I feel and I feel great. Ah, I feel so great, I never thought I'd feel so great. Like I've worked before and I come home and I was just tired and beat and ready to go, to just take a bath and go to bed. But this, oh I could go on and on and on and not stop and I love it. ... I love being here, I really do. It's a school, it's for me to learn but then I find that it's a beautiful job to go in to. It's a job and I like the feeling of it."

She also regarded school as escape from her stressful life. "I close myself off it seem of everything else of all the other problems that I have around me when I can concentrate on school and say, alright, this is what I have to do for tomorrow, I'm going to do it. And this is how it shuts me off of other things

but if I didn't have school, I would start worrying about all these other things that would come up to big things. ... It's almost like it's been my escape because I was in a dead end when I quit my last job because I couldn't handle it. There my mind, my brain just got blanked, it like it shut right off.... The thing is now that I need an education, and that's what's holding on to me. Like that's what I've got to hold on to. ... So I've climbed up again and now I want to be there and gradually all these little problems around me are all to be solved."

Jessica noticed changes in her life as a result of having gone back to school. "The thing I've noticed is that I read more, I listen to the news and before that the news would be ah ... I would react this way to the news, very depressing, I don't want to hear it. ... Now I listen to the news and reading more in magazines and books. ... Hopefully, if it takes me until the end of August, I'm going to try to read a book in one day. ... I like to see myself achieving."

She also noted changes in her self-confidence through a new awareness that there were others who faced similar academic challenges. "It changed me since I started reading and writing. It really did. The confidence of knowing that you did not know that particular thing that you're doing and you went and asked someone else, hey don't feel bad, I'm in the same boat. Oh it was so nice. Oh God, there's another one just like me. And it's really, it gives you a really big feeling that somebody is doing that's next to you, is not way up there

... or she's up there, no, they might know one certain thing but they certainly don't know what you don't know."

Jessica's original goal of achieving grade 12 and typing in an office was modified several times during the year she attended classes. "Well, my first goal was to achieve grade twelve. ... I gotta look at realistic here. I'm forty years old and I want to work where I can get off Social Assistance and when I said this I didn't know if I was going to believe the man in ... or not. ... I made two different steps in my life where if he wasn't going to be in my life, my life was my own and I'd say I'd go as far as grade 10. If I could get my math up to grade 10, my English up to grade 10, the Option for Women (a program offered by Grant MacEwan Community College) would put me in a course, a six month course, a month of training to become a receptionist."

She considered herself to be a stronger person now than she had been before she attended school. "Ya, because there's a lot of people here that I pick up the strength that they have. Because sure, they don't have an education, they don't have their grade 12 but hell, I'm that person.... I have respect of myself. I know what I've done, I know what I'm doing and I will stay there.

... But the people, a lot of people around me was either too high class or more education and I was the dummy. Now, I don't look at myself that way because I've got something that I know I've got. And I just want to get a little more of this education. And that's how I look at it. And I would say again that school has done, it has given me that strength and the other people around it because

then I don't feel like I'm superior than others or very, very low class than others. I'm with the others and there's a whole slew of people here. ... I know there's something out there for me. All I have to do is to get my education to there (gestures high level with hand) and it'll be there for me."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES: COMMON THEMES

INTRODUCTION

The seventeen themes abstracted from the life stories of Adrienne, Janice, Darlene, Jeannette and Jessica are discussed below. While the order for presenting some of these themes is arbitrary, the general intent was to begin with themes related to the women's early life histories (family, school, work), move to perceived educational constraints and goals, challenges that come with returning to school, problems faced at school and in their personal lives and the perceived effects of returning to school.

1. LACK OF SUPPORT IN THE WOMEN'S EARLY YEARS

"...I felt as though I was a neglected child because I was the middle child born ... my dad would be helping me but he was more of a menace to me than anything because all he would do is yell and scream and it would just, there would be just so much to handle the pressure was unbelievable and that's why I had a hard time ..."

"And then I was really bad, I was a bad kid. And then I think it was just all the bad things that happened to me ..."

For all five women in this study, childhood was a time of stress and quite often abuse. Particularly disturbing for me, were the repeated stories of physical, mental and/or sexual abuse suffered by these women as children. Jeannette had been sexually abused by her stepfather and both physically and mentally abused by her natural mother. She was repeatedly told she was "stupid" and "retarded" and accepted this interpretation of her self worth as truth. She admitted to me that the main reason she wanted to become pregnant was so that she could have someone to love and someone who would love her.

Jessica told of a very strict upbringing with little or no support and encouragement from her father. She also alluded to having been abused by a brother. In our group discussion, she told how she felt she'd grown up in a very negative atmosphere and was just now learning the power of having a positive outlook on life.

Adrienne spoke often of a very strict upbringing and the fact that she had few friends. She spoke of her father as being menacing and overpowering and felt that her parents were still trying to dominate her life.

Janice's childhood was the most disturbing for me. She suffered severe physical abuse as a child and was only now beginning to deal with the emotional scars from that difficult time in her life. It was only because of our long term association and the ownership she felt she had of her story, that she even divulged the horrors of her childhood to me. She was very concerned that

her story reflect the truth, what really happened, therefore it was revised to include a painful part of her history.

Childhood was not a happy time for most of them and in our group discussion of the themes that emerged from this study, they all emphasized how badly they did not want their child(ren) to go through what they had experienced as children and how much they felt that their difficult childhoods had made success in school impossible for them.

Darlene was the only woman who indicated any form of support from home in terms of school work. Her mother was instrumental in having her placed in special education classes and continued to be supportive of Darlene's efforts throughout her childhood. Darlene's childhood was stressful because of frequent moves and because of her apparent inability to learn.

2. NEGATIVE MEMORIES OF SCHOOL

"At times I would (get) help but she (teacher) would say, 'Get it done and if it's wrong, I'll help you the next day. And the next day would never show up.'"

As has been mentioned, the women in this study did not have fond memories of their childhood. If they had memories of school, they were often as negative as their memories of home. Four out of the five women were in some kind of "special program" at some point in their schooling. Two of the women attended vocational high school programs where literacy skills were not emphasized.

Of particular interest to me was an apparent lack of memory for anything school related. Especially for Janice and Jeannette, their personal lives were often in such turmoil, that school did not figure prominently in their lives at all and thus they had few memories of school.

3. VARIATION IN SERVICE SECTOR WORK HISTORY

"I thought, it's time for me to find something better cause I couldn't stay waitressing and I knew the ropes there, like you meet a lot of people, different people and I just wanted something better so I got into sales clerk."

All the women had held a number of jobs and all of the jobs were in the service sector. Most tended to be low paying jobs which required few literacy related skills but rather required "people skills". Also, most of the women reported little difficulty in obtaining a job when one was needed. Variation existed in the length of time some women stayed at a job, the reasons for leaving jobs and the satisfaction gained from employment.

4. RECOGNITION OF THE LIMITATIONS IMPOSED BY A LACK OF EDUCATION

"I know how hard it is when you don't have enough (education) and how you make it. Like you try to make it day by day but it's just so hard."

"... the good stuff wasn't for me because of my lacking of education."

It was mainly through employment or the lack of employment that the women in this study recognized that their limited education was limiting their life in some way. For Jessica, a limited education meant she could not take courses that would allow her to get into "...the good stuff" at the group home or into the office at the department store. For Adrienne, a limited education meant she could not take the clerical courses she needed to fulfil her desire to work in an office. For Jeannette, Darlene and Janice, a limited education meant having to rely in Social Assistance to supplement the limited income they could earn.

5. COPING WITH A LIMITED EDUCATION.

"They go, 'I didn't know you can't read, you hide it well.' And you know, you do."

For the women in this study, limited reading skills did not pose great problems for them in their daily life. What they did find is that they relied heavily on family members or friends to assist them when they were unable to cope with literacy activities.

Of special interest to me was the trust these women placed in government officials. Several mentioned that they would phone the appropriate government department if a form had been sent to them. They would then say that they did not understand what was asked of them in the form. Quite often, the form was not explained to them, rather they were told what to fill

in. They did as they were told and, at the time, did not feel that this was out of the ordinary.

Also of interest was the ability of these women to access help when needed. They had a remarkable understanding of the Social Welfare system and all of the services available to them. And as Jessica said "...I've dealt with this for so long that I knew that if I don't get in today, I'll get in tomorrow and that sort of stuff." All of the women had social workers who assisted them but all have had to manage some arrangements on their own; arrangements for childcare, appeals for increases in Social Services allotments, court cases, Maintenance Enforcement personnel, transfer of children to other schools or other programs, arranging foster care etc.

6. TANGIBLE GOALS (GOALS IN THEIR HEADS)

"I wrote down secretary because we had to..."

"... by the time I reach 65 years old, I like (sic) to have a decent pension."

All five women had definite employment related goals. The Over the course of the two years I had contact with them, some modified their goals. Darlene and Jeannette became more determined to achieve grade twelve despite forecasts by their school counsellors that they may not achieve that goal. Both felt that occupations which required less than grade twelve might be unfulfilling after a time and then they would again have to return to upgrading in order to retrain again. Jessica modified her grade level goal

several times but always maintained that she wanted to work in an office. Because she is the eldest in the group, she appeared to feel the need to accomplish a tangible goal more quickly and was not convinced that staying in school until she achieved grade twelve was necessary for her.

Two of the women told of how, in order to secure full-time funding, they "put down" whatever career goal the intake counsellor at the institution thought was attainable. This goal was clerical aide. This caused them problems later on when a new goal began to crystallize and they had to convince the counsellors and the institution that their new career choice was attainable.

7. INTANGIBLE GOALS (GOALS IN THEIR HEARTS)

"I just want to prove to myself, inside myself, that I was able to do it."

In addition to the tangible goals stated by the women, they all spoke of strong desire to accomplish an academic goal for their personal satisfaction. They sometimes spoke of doing it for their children or to set an example for their children but as Darlene said, "...I'm selfish in a way. I want to learn with my children and if it does come ... my son's in grade 5 and his math I can't help him with. I'd like to help him but I think it's more of, I'm coming because I want to learn. I think it's more for me than that I'd like to help my children."

8. SCHOOL AS A STABILIZING INFLUENCE VERSUS SCHOOL AS STRESS PRODUCING

"I close myself off, it seem, of everything else, of all the other problems that I have around me when I can concentrate on school ..."

When this theme was presented to four of the women who participated in a group discussion, three of the four responded that school had been an additional strain on their complex life, not a stabilizing influence. It was only Jessica who repeatedly said how much school had been a stabilizing influence for her. She described it as being her escape and talked about how she enjoyed doing homework until all hours of the night. She compared going to school with having a job where she had to take paperwork home in the evening.

Darlene was unable to attend the group discussion and in an interview with her, she mentioned that school had added much needed structure to her life. "... I'm not as lazy ... I'm getting up early with the kids, like before I'd get up and just lay down on the couch. ... I think it's because of the responsibility that I have to be here every day and that it's something that I wanted so because I wanted it, I have to keep it up."

9. FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AS A STUDENT ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

"Like \$3.50 per day might not mean a lot to some people, but for people like myself who are on Assistance, it means a lot."

One of the main challenges faced by all five women has been attempting to survive on the Social Services allotment they receive. Housing is a major concern since the allotment they receive is usually less than the rent they must pay to stay in accommodations outside the inner city. To supplement their housing allowance, most women took money from the food budget and thus made use of the Food Bank or went without a proper diet for themselves. For all five women, improper diet complicated health problems they had.

Financial juggling became even more difficult when unforeseen expenses arose or when there were extras to pay for. Winter clothing for a child, car insurance or car repairs, Christmas gifts were among incidentals mentioned by the women. Quite often, family members were asked to help out during these times of financial crisis. Asking for financial assistance from family members was very difficult since these family members often also had a very limited income.

By the time that most of the data for this study had been collected, two of the mothers involved had given their children up to alternate forms of childcare. Jessica's mentally handicapped son was placed in foster care. In order for Jessica to keep her two bedroom apartment and the continuing level

of accommodation allowance from Social Services, she had to guarantee that her son spend every second weekend with her. Janice gave her daughter up to be raised by her husband's aunt and uncle. She was now considered a single person without dependents and her Social Services payments were reduced. Janice complained that she was still responsible for clothing her daughter and was unable to visit her regularly because she did not have enough money to pay for transportation out of the city to her daughter's new home.

10. ATTITUDE TOWARDS BEING ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

"I don't want to sit on welfare for the rest of my life."

"You know, I don't want my children finding out the easy way out."

Being independent of Social Assistance was strong motivation for all of the women interviewed. Janice and Jeannette spoke of having been on social assistance for many years, Jeannette for most of her life. Adrienne, Darlene and Jessica had been on and off Social Assistance for fewer years, perhaps because all had been married and had had an extra income at some point in their adult lives.

In our group discussion, it was interesting how they considered themselves to be more deserving of Social Assistance benefits than others they knew who also received them. They felt that because they were attempting to change their lives through education and because they were single parents, they

should be given increased support. They clearly felt that there were different classes of Social Assistance recipients and that there were many people who were "cheating" the system.

11. INDEPENDENCE/DEPENDENCE STRUGGLE FACED BY THE SINGLE MOTHER

"I like being independent but I don't have enough knowledge to look at life (tears and crying). And having someone that has done a lot of, you know, having income, coming in all the time and making sure the bills are paid and at the same token having enough money to go places, to go travelling, well this is what I really want but I don't, I can't see myself succeeding that way on my own..."

All five women have struggled to establish some independence from the fathers of their children and all found that this struggle was an ongoing one. Because they all depend on Social Assistance, they are all dependent on an institution over which they have little control. They also spoke of having to depend on the financial goodwill of friends and relatives and feelings of guilt and powerlessness associated with this. Jessica, more than the others, spoke of a desire to find another man who would "take care" of the financial aspect of her life so that she could concentrate on achieving her academic goals. She recognized the difficulty of finding a partner who would give her the financial

stability she craved and not interfere in her personal goals and found this realization painful.

12. CHALLENGES WHEN RAISING CHILDREN

"If anyone could adopt her, I'd be happy."

For the single mothers in this study, raising children on their own was very challenging. All mentioned that disciplining children was a major concern. Jeannette even mentioned fear that she would resort to physical abuse of her son because she did not know how to discipline in other ways. Adrienne expressed extreme frustration with disciplining her daughter and mentioned several times to me that she would be willing to place her daughter in a foster home. Janice found she was no longer able to discipline her daughter and did give her daughter up to be raised by relatives. Jessica placed her son in a foster home after coping with his mental and physical handicaps for over fifteen years.

All five mentioned that a major challenge they had was having time for themselves. They became so absorbed with schoolwork, maintaining a home, financial juggling and caring for their children that they had no time for themselves. Forming new relationships with men or women was difficult simply because there was not enough time in the day.

Childcare was mentioned as a major concern by Jeannette and Jessica. Of the five women interviewed, Jeannette had the youngest child and found it

very difficult to find adequate and affordable childcare. She relied, in the end, on dayhomes rather than daycares. In the dayhome, she felt he was receiving more individual attention but even so, he was frequently ill. Jessica's childcare situation was more difficult since her child was a 15 year old mentally handicapped male. She relied heavily on Social Services organizations to give her "a break".

13. DECLINE IN HEALTH

All of the women interviewed expressed that they were under some medical care due to stress related disorders. Jessica suffered from a form of arthritis that was aggravated by improper diet. Janice suffered from blood clots in her legs aggravated by long periods of standing or sitting. Jeanette suffered from nervous conditions aggravated by tension and a lack of proper nutrition. Darlene suffered from diabetes and was on anti depressant medication. Adrienne suffered from asthma and was just recently diagnosed as epileptic. All women were on medication of some sort and most complained of fatigue in the daytime and sleeplessness at night.

14. PROBLEMS WITH ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS AS THEY RELATE TO THE SINGLE PARENT

"... but he (teacher) doesn't understand it when you're a parent and you have two small children, you've got enough responsibility, your housework and kids and everything else, like you just can't have time for homework. It's midnight when I go to bed and 4:30 when I get up. I'm exhausted..."

The women in this study attended academic upgrading programs in large, institutional settings. Because they were part of a large organization, they indicated that the good of the institution sometimes took precedence over the good of the individual student. This was most often demonstrated in policies with regard to attendance and homework. Several women expressed frustration with the rigid attendance policy at one institution where an unexcused absence resulted in loss of funding for the day. Another expressed frustration with the amount of homework that was to be completed daily. She found that she could not keep up with the homework demands and was forced to drop one course.

Another often cited challenge was the speed at which material is "covered". Courses at one institution are only 10 weeks long and inability to pass the course results in a loss of funding for that course should it have to be repeated.

15. SUPPORT SYSTEMS

"You can't really depend on your friends, you can only depend on your family to support you."

As has been mentioned, the challenge of maintaining independence when they are in a very dependent situation is an ongoing battle for these women. All women mentioned the importance of a family to support them not only financially but emotionally as they cope with raising children and attending school. The extra challenge they faced is that quite often their family relationships were quite fragile. For Adrienne, who had several fallings out with her family, the church became an important support system. Church members babysat for her, she attended a weekly single parent's night out, the church held information sessions on topics relevant to Adrienne (for example tax preparation), and the individual members of her church were her friends.

Jeannette relied heavily on her child's father's family for support, as did Janice.

For Jessica, an elderly mother provided emotional and sometimes financial support. Other support was gained from Social Services organizations as the need arose.

Darlene's mother provided her with emotional support and she relied on a support network of friends.

16. TANGIBLE RESULTS OF UPGRADING

"... my daughter has a learning disability and I have an appointment with her teacher tomorrow and in the last few years, I've had my mom with me, so tomorrow, I'm going by myself."

"Like I'm reading notes from school from the teachers now."
changes that are measurable.

Over the two years I contacted most of these women, most had experienced some tangible results of having upgraded their education but for most, these changes were not life changing. They felt a little better able to cope with daily reading and writing but found they still relied on friends and relatives to help them comprehend difficult material.

Jessica noted a real interest in reading now that she became exposed to books that related to her life. She became an ardent reader of self help books and those dealing with increasing self-esteem.

17. INTANGIBLE RESULTS OF UPGRADING

"... like my mind is more open now, I can see the world and see what maybe I'm going to become."

It is in the area of intangible results of upgrading that the women noted the greatest changes. These intangible results include feelings of increased positive self-esteem and self-confidence. They also include a feeling of being part of a group. Jessica mentioned her feelings of joy at discovering that there

were others, like herself, who had difficulty with reading and writing. This feeling of not being isolated gave them more self confidence and appreciation for the knowledge they and their fellow students had.

Jeannette had mentioned that she was no longer afraid to ask for help and to admit that she did not understand something. She was no longer afraid that people would laugh at her for not knowing.

CONCLUSION

The seventeen themes offer another way of interpreting the data collected from the five women. These were the common threads running through the case studies and were confirmed by four of the five women during the group meeting.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

My review of current literature relating to ABE and female ABE students revealed a lack of information on the lives of students from the student perspective. To add to the existing body of knowledge I undertook a qualitative study which sought to explore three aspects of the lives of single mothers in ABE; their personal history, the challenges they face as students in ABE programs and the triumphs or outcomes they enjoy. In the conclusions described under each of these headings below, I attempted to link existing theory with my observations of the five women in my study.

CONCLUSIONS

Personal History.

Illiteracy is not simply the result of a failing in the school system. It is a symptom of a number of social problems. Family violence, abuse, indifference, and poverty do not provide fertile ground for nurturing positive self-concepts and a love of learning. In the cases of the five women I interviewed, the family and early schooling were prime factors in the women's lack of literacy skills. Lack of parental support and abuse made it extremely difficult for four out of

the five women to concentrate on school and Webb's personal factors (1970), including parental disinterest, accounted for their leaving school before attaining an adequate level of literacy.

The women in this study were characteristic of many ABE students in that their work history consisted of semi-skilled or unskilled labour, frequent changes in employment and periods of unemployment. All of the women indicated that their low levels of literacy did not cause them problems on the job but that they were denied chances for advancement. Jessica and Adrienne did not hide their lack of literacy skills from those around them. The other women indicated that most people did not realize that reading and writing were a problem, thus one could imply that they were hiding their weakness. All of the women relied on what Fingeret (1983) described as social networks to accomplish the literacy tasks that were too difficult for them. What was surprising to me was that despite limited literacy skills, they had knowledge of and accessed many government support services. As new and unexpected challenges arose, they struggled through, though often times as Jessica said, "... it was just an ordeal, but I've dealt with it for so long that I knew that if I don't get in today, I'll get in tomorrow..."

For at least three of the five women interviewed, a life change as described by Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) precipitated their enrolment in ABE. Divorce signalled the beginning of hardship for both Adrienne and Jessica as they found the jobs that had once provided additional income for their families

did not provide enough income for them to survive on now that they were single parents. The birth of Jeanette's child forced her to examine her future in light of her history of unemployment. She needed to change her employability in order to support her son and thus upgrading was her first step. Congruent with the findings of Anderson and Mohny (1988), all five women acknowledged that in addition to motivating factors, the timing was right for them to return to school. Adrienne's, Janice's and Darlene's children were now school age and they had time to make changes in their own lives. Jessica was between jobs and Jeannette felt she should upgrade now, while her son was an infant, so that she would be ready to start working when he was school age. The tangible goals or instrumental aspects of motivation discussed by Pillay (1986), were the main reasons for enrolment. It was only after attending classes that psychological reasons, such as feelings of self-confidence and pride in themselves as people, became evident and served to keep them motivated.

Challenges

As noted by Jones and Charnley (1977), many of the challenges facing students are external to the ABE program. Economic problems (Otto and Ford in Kavale and Lindsey, 1977) figured prominently in all of the conversations I had with the women. The stress of living at or below the poverty line made it very difficult to concentrate on school. Feelings of inadequacy and

frustration were expressed to me whenever we discussed food, clothing or shelter.

Social problems or, as Teeling (1990) described, interpersonal problems were also felt by the students I interviewed. Jeanette spoke of losing friends because she was attempting to change her life and Adrienne often spoke of how her family did not support her efforts at self-improvement. Lewis (1984) suggested that family members were sometimes described as "toxics" (those who discourage students attempts) but most often described as "rooters" (those who support the student). For Darlene, Jeannette and Jessica, their mothers and children were the "rooters" in their academic undertaking. What became apparent was that many of these women were living very socially complicated lives. They were having to deal with exhusbands or boyfriends, their own extended families, friends, social workers and counsellors while trying to provide stability at home and trying to cope academically.

The women in my study also indicated that there were instructional problems (Teeling, 1990). Lack of time to do homework, the amount of homework, inflexibility in terms of attendance and the pressure of rushing through what needed to be covered were all mentioned as challenges that the institution presented.

Childcare and transportation were found, in DeCoito's (1984) study, to be concerns of women in ABE. Jeanette and Jessica indicated that childcare was

a major concern for them. All of the women found childcare in emergency situations (illness or accident) was nonexistent; thus they had to miss classes.

The internal challenges (Teeling, 1990) the women in my study faced were perhaps their most difficult to articulate. Jeannette spoke often of her doubts in her ability to complete the program. She did not express doubt in her academic ability, rather in her ability to overcome the external challenges she encountered as a student. Adrienne also spoke of her desire to quit, if only she could obtain employment. The pressure of dealing with her two children and coping academically produced enormous stress in her life.

Outcomes

Despite the challenges these women faced, most persisted. Over the course of writing this thesis, I continued to keep in touch with the participants on an informal basis. Darlene left her program for two terms because she had to deal with a crisis in her family. She planned to return.

By and large the outcomes for my sample were mainly psychological (Pillay, 1986) or affective personal achievements (Jones and Charnley, 1977). All of the women noted increases in their self-confidence and self-esteem. Jeannette was less afraid that people would ridicule her if she asked for help and Jessica found a social group with whom she could identify. All of the women did note instrumental outcomes (Pillay, 1986) in that they were now able to do many literacy related activities that would have required help before. Jessica

became very interested in self-help books after a self-esteem workshop. She was almost devouring these books in her quest to better understand who she was. Jeannette spoke of reading to her son who by now was beginning to talk. Darlene was attending parent-teacher interviews without her mother at her side. In our group discussion, they mentioned that although they were using their new found skills, they still relied on others to help them with more difficult literacy related tasks (eg. taxes, government forms).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTISE

1. Support services for ABE participants should be expanded and special support services implemented for single mothers within the ABE population.

Career counselling and job options should be explored with each student so that a realistic assessment of future employment can be arrived at by the student and institution in partnership. Flexibility in terms of goal setting must be allowed as the student comes to discover areas of interest and talents that may not have been considered at the beginning of her program.

Childcare should be recognized as a support service of ABE, especially emergency childcare. Strict attendance policies may be deemed necessary by institutions, but these institutions must be flexible enough to deal with individual cases and should make every effort to insure that their policies can be adhered to by all members of the student population.

ABE programs that offer classes in the evening and summer should consider the support services that might be needed by subgroups, like single mothers, within the ABE population. Childcare was a major concern for women with school aged children who wished to attend classes through the summer or in the evening.

Single mothers should be encouraged to organize support groups. The agenda for a support group of single mothers in ABE should be determined by the participants and my study indicated that possible topics to be addressed might be childcare, discipline (self and children's), networking and companionship.

2. Those who deliver ABE programs should recognize the challenges that are specific to single mothers and be flexible enough to accommodate this group of learners.

Homework must be manageable and flexibility should be exercised in individual cases. In light of the difficulty single mothers face securing adequate childcare in emergencies, attendance policies should be flexible should emergencies warrant absences. Instructors need to become aware of the personal challenges facing the single parents in their classes. Personal health, problems with children, complex social networks, housing may all be challenges from outside of programs, but they may have a direct influence on the student's ability to succeed in the literacy program. Through meaningful dialogue with students some of these challenges might be addressed as a part of course content or appropriate referrals might be made.

3. Recognition must be given to the importance of the affective personal achievements of ABE students.

Too often, it seems, achievement in ABE is measured only in terms of increased grade scores on standardized tests and students may feel that they have only made progress if their grade scores change. Changes in self-confidence and self-esteem may be equally important and, as many researchers (Darkenwald and Valentine, 1984; Jones and Charnley, 1977) have said, they may need to precede any gains in academic achievement.

4. The prevention of illiteracy necessitates not only an examination of educational practice.

Findings of this study do indicate that the existing manner of addressing the literacy "problem" requires examination of educational practice. Methods of program delivery, teaching methods, the role of the classroom teacher, the role of counsellors and student support services can all be explored to improve literacy education. It is easy to believe that an educational solution exists for the problem of illiteracy. So we, as practitioners continue to tinker with the symptom and rarely examine the causes of the illness. But this study shows that illiteracy is more than an educational problem with educational solutions. It is a societal problem that will require an examination of the values of our society. The literacy problem will continue to exist unless larger societal issues like abuse and violence, poverty, inequality, unemployment etc. are dealt with.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

1. To what extent is a history of abuse characteristic of the ABE population and is this a characteristic of the general population to the same extent?

I was shocked to learn that all of the students I interviewed had been abused, either physically, sexually or mentally, as children. To me this reinforced my belief that illiteracy is sometimes only a reflection of larger problems that exist in our society. If we are ever to adequately address the problem of illiteracy, we must also be prepared to deal with many other ills that plague our culture.

2. Why is it that some children, who face many of the personal challenges described by the women I interviewed, do succeed academically?

An examination of the success stories of those who, despite adversity, do succeed academically, may yield important implications for practice.

3. What is the financial situation of students in ABE? What are the implications of lack of financial support in terms of success in ABE?

How are students coping on such a limited income? Are some able to cope better than others? Why? What are the implications for educational practice? These questions arise from this examination of the lives of single mothers.

4. What is the relationship between gains in affective personal achievement and employability?

All of the students in this study entered programs in order to increase their employability and all found that they did gain confidence and positive self-

esteem. A longitudinal study should be undertaken to determine if these affective gains make a difference in students' employability.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

It is an understatement to say that illiteracy is a complex problem. Not only do findings of this study indicate that modifications to existing programs must be made in order to better serve the subgroup of single mothers, but that it is important to realize that the prevention of illiteracy necessitates that we address larger issues within our society. In order to understand these larger issues, we need to begin with the lives of adults who are affected by a lack of literacy skills.

Over the course of the two years I gathered data for this study, I was struck by the value of doing a longitudinal study. In order to gather detailed information about a student's past I had to gain trust and confidence. This could only be done over an extended period of contact and after genuine rapport had been established. The more often I met with each woman, the more she revealed personal information to me and the closer I could come to describing her reality.

Since completing this study, I have continued to maintain contact with the five women. Their lives are continually changing, sometimes as a direct result of upgrading literacy, often just because of their life circumstances. I hope to

continue our contact out of professional interest and because these women have become part of my life.

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